

RESEARCH REPORT

God as a Man Versus God as a Woman: Perceiving God as a Function of the Gender of God and the Gender of the Participant

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This study examines the hypothesis that women and men relate differently to a male god-figure and a female god-figure. The participants (281 undergraduates at a large West Coast university in the United States, and 154 undergraduates at a large Mid-western university in the United States, who participated for course credit) wrote fictional stories about an encounter with either a female god or a male god. The stories ($N = 435$) were then content analyzed for differences in story characteristics as a result of the gender of god. The results indicate significant differences due to both the gender of god and to the gender of the participant. Results indicate that participants writing about a female god were skeptical, but more likely to experience reassurance and comfort. Men were more likely to write action-oriented stories, whereas women wrote feelings-oriented stories.

The god-concept (who or what one believes God¹ to be) is a topic that interests a variety of people, including psychologists (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Heller, 1986;

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¹The term "god" will be used for deities regardless of attributed gender. Also, when the word "god" is used as a proper noun, it will be capitalized.

Mollenkott, 1984; Randour & Bondanza, 1986; Rizzutto, 1974), theologians (e.g., Daly, 1979; Goldenberg, 1979), and the general public. The god-concept has been distinguished from a god-image, with the former referring to a person's definition of God and the latter representing the person's feeling of what God might be like (Kunkel, Cook, Meshel, Daughtry, & Hauenstein, 1999; Lawrence, 1997). In addition, some authors have referred to a representation of God, which would be evoked because God cannot be directly seen, and thus one bases the representation on experience with humans (e.g., Vergote, 1980). Still others have suggested that individuals have many concepts of God, and these might be evoked when attempting to explain phenomena that seem otherwise inexplicable (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996, p. 393). In this study, the *concept of God* refers to a schema that one uses to organize a variety of feelings, images, definitions, and representations of God. Although there is variety in the methodology and focus of research investigating the god-concept, most share a striking commonality: They include the implicit and sometimes explicit assumption that God is male. However, when studying the god-concept, the question of gender can be considered in two ways: (a) the attributed gender of the god-concept and (b) the gender of the participant.

Regarding the gender of the participant, researchers have noted that women are significantly different from men in their experience of religion on several dimensions. Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975, p. 71) surveyed the literature and concluded that "women are more religious on every criterion," including church membership, church attendance, and frequency of prayer. In addition, women were more likely to have conservative religious beliefs. The research on the god-concept also reveals gender differences. Women are more likely than men to see God as a healer (Nelson, Cheek, & Au, 1985), nurturant (Roberts, 1989), and majestic (Hammersla, Andrews-Qualls, & Frease, 1986). Men are more likely than women to see God as a "powerful king" (Weatherby, 1990), and vindictive (Hammersla et al., 1986). Women are also more likely to believe in an afterlife than are men (Hood et al., 1996). In some cultures (e.g., Zaire and Belgium), there are sex differences in the views of God's paternal and maternal characteristics (Tamayo, 1980).

Heller's (1986) study of children's god-concepts also revealed gender differences. He found that boys tended to describe a "thinking and knowledgeable God" (p. 57), whereas girls were more likely to describe a god that was "more intimacy-oriented than power-oriented" (p. 71). It is worth noting that Heller's study was different from many studies in that it included free response techniques (i.e., drawing pictures of God and writing a letter to God) as well as asking specific questions. Among the common themes that emerged were such concepts as "therapist God," a concern with one's guilt and purity, a concern with forgiveness from God, and God's nurturance.

Feminist approaches to the study of the god-concept focus on the androcentric nature of the Western god-concept. Many individuals' characterization of God as

masculine has been remarked upon by feminist writers (Daly, 1979; Goldenberg, 1979; Reuther, 1979), and documented empirically (Foster & Keating, 1992). Feminist theologians hypothesized that the culture's male god-concept is detrimental to women in several ways. For example, the male god-concept can have an impact on general status of women in relation to men. The primary thesis of this position is that (a) God is commonly conceived of as male; (b) men, as a result, become associated with God; and (c) therefore, women are relegated to inferior status.

One method of examining the nature of the god-concept is to view it with much the same framework as used in the cognitive approach to the study of self-concept. The god-concept, according to this approach, is a collection of god-schema. A schema is a cognitive structure, derived from past experience, that organizes and directs cognitive processing. Accordingly, god-schemata are cognitive structures about who or what God is, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of god-related information.

The working god-concept, analogous to the working self-concept, consists of "core god-schemata," and those god-schemata are activated as a result of the immediate social circumstances. Not all god-schemata will be activated at any one time; only a subset will be activated. This is the crucial concept. Herein lies the key to ethical, systematic experimentation in the psychology of religion. People have numerous god-schemata. These god-schemata can be systematically activated. Once activated, the god-schemata influence information processing. The implications of this are that the *activation of specific god-schemata* can be systematically manipulated.

The goal of this study was to systematically activate a male or a female god-concept and to determine if there are gender differences in the way that the god-concept is described. To activate the designated god-schema, the participants were asked to write a fictional story about meeting God in the form of either a man or a woman.

The fictional story method of schema-activation was chosen for several specific reasons. It was necessary to bypass pejorative responses to the notion of God as a woman. In addition, as outlined by the theoretical framework, it was necessary for the participants to relate themselves to God in some way. Finally, a task that was engaging to the participants was required.

There is an additional, major benefit to the use of the fictional story method of schema activation. The stories themselves provide much rich data and insight into the content of various god-schemata. Not only do the stories provide a way to examine the cultural as well as some people's personal god-concepts in more depth, the story methodology also allows systematic comparison of differences of god as a woman and god as a man. Interesting questions related to this might be, for example, does God as a man have a fundamentally different physical characterization than God as a woman? Does God as a man and God as a woman have different demeanors? Do participants relate differently to God as a man and God as a woman?

This study is designed to test the hypotheses that (a) women have more nurturant god-concepts than do men, (b) participants will find a female god more nurturant than a male god, (c) women have a greater sense of "connectedness" with a female god than with a male god, and (d) participants will respond differently to a male god and a female god

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 456 undergraduate students at two large universities (one on the West Coast of the United States, $n = 290$ and one in the Midwest of the United States, $n = 166$), who participated for course credit. Twenty-one participants were excluded from the analysis because of failure to follow directions. Of the remaining 435 participants who participated, 238 were women (55%) and 197 were men (45%). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 64, with a mean age of 19.27. The majority of participants were White students (71%, $N = 308$), with 117 Asian students (27%) and 10 participants who were neither White nor Asian. Participation in the experiment was limited to only native English speakers to minimize intercultural differences. The participants were tested in groups of 2 to 25 at a time.

Procedure

Participants received a packet containing the story sheet and blank lined paper, several personality inventories,² and a demographics questionnaire. The story sheet instructed the participants as follows:

Write a fictional story with the plot given below. Take a few minutes to think about the story first. The entire exercise should take 30 minutes. Feel free to be as creative as you like. Plot: one day God appears to you as a man [woman] about your age. What happens? Describe God. What do you talk about?

Approximately half of the participants ($N = 227$, 52%) were told to write about meeting God in the form of a woman, and the remainder ($N = 208$, 48%) was told to write about meeting God in the form of a man.

The instructions specified that God should be the age of the participants (a novel idea for some participants) for two purposes. First, it was hoped that asking

²The personality measures were collected in the context of a larger study on the relationship between self-esteem and perceptions of the gender of God, but were not analyzed for this study.

participants to think of God as young might deflect some of the attention from God's gender. Second, including a young god in the plot served as a control in that it offered participants in both conditions (God as male and God as female) at least one element to which to respond with surprise.

RESULTS

The story protocols were handwritten and ranged in length from one-half page to four and one-half pages, with a mean length of 2.2 pages. Each story protocol was analyzed by two independent judges. The judges were to determine whether the stories contained any of 12 elements. The 12 elements were generated based on a pilot study in which students were asked to write stories as outlined for this study. The stories were examined for themes that arose multiple times, and these themes became the elements examined in this project. The independent judges were trained by the researchers to identify the elements within the stories. The judges were not blind to conditions as it was apparent in the stories when God had been described as being female or male and young or old. Disagreements between the judges were resolved by a third independent judge (the first author). The raters' judgments were dichotomous: Each question required a yes or no answer. Interrater reliability was measured in terms of straight percentage of agreement (93% for all 12 questions) and Cohen's Kappa (ranging from .49 to .81).

The twelve elements were as follows:

1. Did the participant discuss her or his personal problems with God?
2. Did the participant seek or receive personal guidance from God?
3. Did the story include unconditional love from God?
4. Did the participant experience feelings of being loved, peacefulness, or a sense of calmness as a result of the encounter with God?
5. Did the participant receive assurances from God that he or she is a good and worthy person?
6. Did the participant compare herself or himself to God?
7. Did the writer express surprise at God's gender?
8. Did the participant express surprise at God's age?
9. Did the participant express physical/sexual attraction toward God?
10. Did the story include performance of a miracle?
11. Did the participant question the ways of the world?
12. Did the participant receive a mission or sense of purpose from God during the encounter?

The results of these protocol analyses (represented as frequencies) were analyzed with logistic regression analyses with the gender of god and gender of the

participant as independent variables. Logistic regression analyses use a chi-square goodness-of-fit method to test different models consisting of all possible combinations of independent variables and interactions. By isolating factors whose removal significantly improves prediction, the model that best "fits" the data is identified (Dixon, 1985).

The protocols were analyzed for elements one through five to test the hypotheses that (a) women have more nurturant god-concepts than men and (b) participants find a female god more nurturant than a male god.

The first element. The first element ("Did the participant discuss her or his personal problems with God?") had an interrater reliability of 93% ($K = .68$) and was present in 48 (11%) of the protocols. Women were twice as likely (15%) to discuss their personal problems than were men (7%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 7.54, p < .01$). Examples of responses include: "I get extremely sad and ask if she'll give me the power to overcome the bad parts of myself" and "Then I asked about my life and what he thought it would be best to do in the future. ..."

The second element. The second element ("Did the participant seek or receive personal guidance from God?") had an interrater reliability of 84% ($K = .60$), and was present in 24% of the protocols. This element is closely related to the last, and a linear regression indicates they are moderately correlated ($r = .29, p < .0001$). Not surprisingly, then, women were almost twice as likely (30%) to seek or receive personal guidance during the encounter than were men (16%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 11.33, p < .001$). Example responses include: "She had been looking down on my [sic], watching everything that I've done. She has seen all of the pain and tragedies that I've been through, so she thought that all's [sic] I needed was a friend to talk to and spill my thoughts out to. So we talked about my problems ..." and "I ask God how he feels about the dietary laws. I need some guidance to get me back on the track because it is hard to go back to separating meat & milk, not having pork or lard, etc. ..."

The third element. The third element ("Did the story include unconditional love from God?") had an interrater reliability of 97% ($K = .72$), and was present in 4% of the stories. Because expected cell frequencies should be a minimum of five (Tabachnik & Fidell, 1989), further analyses are not reported. However, it should be noted that women were more than twice as likely (5%) to include this element than were men (2%). Sample responses include: "He affirms what is already known. That he loves me and all the people of the earth no matter what they have

done or not done.” And, “there is such a huge sensation of unconditional love—of total acceptance.”

The fourth element. The fourth element (“Did the participant experience feelings of being loved, peacefulness, or a sense of calmness as a result of the encounter with God?”) had an interrater reliability of 90% ($K = .68$), and was present in 21% of the stories. Women were twice as likely to include this element (27%) than were men (13%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 12.36, p < .001$), and participants in the female-god condition were somewhat more likely (24%) to include this element than were participants in the male-god condition (16%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 3.58, p < .06$). Sample responses include: “It was truly apparent how much love and compassion she felt for me, the love seemed very much like my mom's love for me.”

The fifth element. The fifth element (“Did the participant receive assurances from God that she or he is a good and worthy person or receive forgiveness?”) had an interrater reliability of 97% ($K = .78$). Once again, women were twice as likely to include this element (10%) than were men (5%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 4.04, p < .05$). Responses included such comments as: “I immediately began to cry for repentance. I begged for forgiveness. Then I felt a great comfort come over me again,” and “I asked her if she thought I was a good person, as a whole, despite all the terrible ‘sins’ I have committed so far in my life. She said yes—I am a good person.”

In summary, the analyses suggest that participants do not view a female god as more nurturant than a male god, but women seem to have a more nurturant view of god than do men.

The sixth element. The sixth element (“Did the participant compare herself or himself to God?”) was used to test the hypothesis that women have a greater sense of connectedness with a female god than with a male god. This element had an interrater reliability of 95% ($K = .49$), but was identified in only 12 of the 435 (3%) analyzed protocols. Therefore, this element was not analyzed further. However, it should be noted that although 5% (6/124) of the women compared themselves to the female god, and 6% (6/94) of the men compared themselves to the male god, there were no cross-gender comparisons. In other words, women did not compare themselves to the male god, and men did not compare themselves to the female god. Comparisons of self to God took the form of noting that God was, on some dimension “a lot like me.” For example, responses included: “You [God] are no different from me,” and “I sat there admiring this girl who amazed and attracted me. I wanted to be like her. To talk the

way she did, to look like her ... I wished I was like her ... then I realized that she was me."

In order to test the hypothesis that participants will respond differently to a female god than to a male god, the protocols were analyzed for elements seven through ten.

The seventh element. The seventh element ("Did the participant express surprise at God's gender?") had an interrater reliability of 95% ($K = .81$), and was identified in 55 (13%) of the protocols. None of the participants expressed surprise that God was male, but fully 25% of those in the female-god condition expressed surprise that God was female ($\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 77.81, p < .0001$). An example of surprise at God's gender is found in following comments: "God is a woman. All my life I have been conditioned to regard God as a man so this takes me by surprise. God is a woman of great beauty." And, "I was shocked when God appeared to me as a young woman like myself. I always pictured God as the loving father-figure type."

The eighth element. The eighth element ("Did the participant express surprise at God's age?") was included, in part, as a comparison item for surprise at God's gender. This item had an interrater reliability of 95%, and a total of 15 participants expressed such surprise. Once again, because the expected cell frequencies were less than five per cell, results are not reported. However, it should be noted that although encountering the female god evoked an expression of surprise in 25% of the participants, encountering a young god evoked an expression of surprise in only 4% of the participants (regardless of the gender of god). This suggests that God as a woman is more surprising than a young god. An example of surprise at God's gender is found in the story written by a Christian woman who wrote, "I never pictured God would be my age though."

The ninth element. The ninth element ("Did the writer express physical/sexual attraction toward god?") had an interrater reliability of 96% ($K = .69$) and was identified in 31 (7%) of the protocols. Not surprisingly, men were more likely to express attraction toward the female god, whereas women were more likely to express attraction toward the male god ($\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 13.00, p < .0005$). Further analyses indicated that 6% of the women in the male-god condition expressed attraction compared to 19% of the men in the female-god condition (comparing these two conditions yields a $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 7.77, p < .01$). Some of the participants were overtly sexual in their attraction. For example, comments included:

"[God had] an incredibly gorgeous face, and big [breasts] on a long slender body. She was by far the most perfect woman in existence." In other instances, the attraction was expressed more mildly; for example: "[God] was pretty cute and he looked like the all-american [*sic*] man. I thought he might be fun to go out with sometime."

The tenth element. The tenth element ("Did the story include the performance of a miracle?") including such things as magical location changes, flying, or telepathic communication) had an interrater reliability of 92% ($K = .84$), and was present in 37% of the stories. Participants were more likely to require a miracle as proof of divinity from the female god (41%) than from the male god (30%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 4.02, p < .05$), and men were more likely to include a miracle (42%) than were women (32%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 4.85, p < .05$).

In summary, it seems that participants did respond differently to a male god than to a female god, in that there was more surprise, more physical attraction, and more proof needed when God was female.

Two unexpected elements (11 and 12) surfaced during pretesting that revealed interesting gender differences. The eleventh element ("Did the participant question the ways of the world?") including such problems as existence of pain, death, and hunger) had an interrater reliability of 86% ($K = .52$), and was identified in 81 (19%) of the protocols. Participants were somewhat more likely to question the female-god (22%) about problems in the world than the male-god (15%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 3.08, p < .10$). Responses included: "I would want to know why we have so many starving people? Why is aids so widespread" and "I would ask her why she does nothing about the human suffering that takes place all throughout the world."

The twelfth element. ("Did the participant receive a mission or sense of purpose from God during the encounter?") had an interrater reliability of 86% ($K = .76$), and was present in 10% of the stories. In this case, men were somewhat more likely to include a mission theme (12%) than were women (7%; $\chi^2 [1, N = 435] = 3.52, p < .07$). Sample responses included: "She told me that I needed to go out into the world and tell everyone about God" and "We spoke for what seemed like minutes but was actually hours. I was not as confused as I was the day before and my life seemed to have a purpose."

DISCUSSION

One of the major goals of this study was to determine whether men and women hold different views of God. Men were more likely to express attraction toward a fe-

male-god than women were to a male-god. Men were also more likely to include a miracle in their stories, and include a mission or purpose theme. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to discuss their personal problems with God, to seek or receive guidance from God, to experience feelings of peace, love, or calmness from the encounter, and to receive forgiveness or assurances that they are good and worthy persons.

The stories written by the men, then, could be characterized as including action elements (miracles, missions, and sense of purpose), whereas the women wrote stories characterized as feelings oriented (discussing problems, feeling loved or peacefulness, reassurances of their self-worth). Although the gender differences described may have implications for understanding a person's schema of God, it should be noted that, in general, the rate of responses to the items was low. That is, for the most part, men and women responded in a similar fashion. However, when there was a difference in responses, it was clear that men and women viewed God in different ways. These results seem consistent with previous studies that found that women view God as more supportive (healer, see Nelson et al., 1985; nurturant, see Roberts, 1989) than do men. In addition, recall that Heller (1986) found that girls also described a god who was more intimacy oriented than did boys.

A second major goal of this study was to determine if participants had different perceptions of a male god than a female god. Although participants of both genders commonly expressed surprise when God was female, no participant was surprised that God was male. Related to this, participants were much more likely to require proof of God's divinity in the form of a miracle when she was female than when he was male. They were also more likely to question the ways of the world with a female deity, and to talk about experiencing peace, love, and calmness as a result of the encounter.

The stories about the female-god then, not surprisingly, were characterized by skepticism and surprise. However, they also included a seeking for answers and a soothing of the spirit (feeling loved, calmness, or peacefulness). These data are consistent with the hypothesis that both women and men see a female god-concept as more nurturant than a male god-concept (Clanton, 1990; Mollenkott, 1989). Again, the above results should be interpreted cautiously due to the relatively low numbers of participants who included these elements within their stories.

An important question when studying gender differences in images or concepts of God is whether a separate theory should be utilized to describe women's versus men's views of God. The results suggest that there are, indeed, significant gender differences in the concept of God as defined in this study. However, because of the limited number of responses on which most of these differences are based, it would be premature to recommend separate theories.

Although these results are intriguing, there are several limitations of this study that should be considered. First, as is common with free-response data, the

elements examined were found in a minority of cases. Some were found in only 3% of the stories (e.g., compares self to God, unconditional love from God) to a maximum of 36% (performance of a miracle). An objective follow-up study in which elements are presented to the participant (Do you compare yourself to God? If you met God, would you question the ways of the world?) might be informative. A perhaps more important follow up would be to expand the participant base to include people of different age groups, different ethnicities, and different religions to determine whether the results could be replicated with different populations.

The major drawback to this study, however, is the mildness of the stimulus. *Imagining* God as a woman or a man for 30 min is pallid compared to 20 or more years of *believing* God to be a woman or a man. This is a problem unlikely to be solved. It would be highly unethical to manipulate religious beliefs. Taking advantage of naturally occurring differences, as encouraged by Batson (1977), is not possible in this case. It is likely that those persons who believe God to be female also differ from those who believe God to be male in some systematic ways. Therefore, the methodology used in this study is a compromise. However, even with the limitations, the results of this study are an important first step in empirically examining the effect of gender on relationships with God.

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