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Conceptions of Relationships

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Conceptions of Relationships with the Divine as Compared to Interpersonal Relationships

Katie Taylor working with Professor Carolyn P. Edwards, EdD

Purpose:

This study seeks to examine the relationships between young adults' understandings of past and current interpersonal relationships and their conceptualizations of a personal relationship with a higher spiritual power.

Hypotheses:

- Individuals who report permissive (lax) parents will be more likely to view God as inactive or disappointing.
- Individuals who report authoritarian (rigid, strict) parents will be more likely to view God as a distant authority figure who is unfriendly, disappointing, or unstable.
- Individuals who report authoritative (democratic, guiding) parents will be more likely to view God as active, friendly, loving, and gratifying.
- Women will report closer and more intense relationships with God than will men.
- Participants who report higher levels of masculinity will report lower levels of awareness and realistic acceptance of God, higher levels of disappointment, instability, and grandiosity, and fewer descriptions of personal interactions with God.

Theory: Development of God Schemas

Aside from overt religious experiences (e.g., conversion experiences), individuals are faced daily with symbols and images of God in art, interpersonal dialogue, media, social events, and the like. The most obvious method of a person's learning about God is direct tuition from family members. Though the space is where expectations are taught and enforced in a church setting, the child nonetheless must first bring his or her own understanding of God to the location of instruction for use as the initial building block, to then be shaped and rectified within that particular context.

Much appears to be gained from relational learning. The modification of a child's God concept comes from personal interactions within a religious context. In school settings, expectations and encouragement from teachers tend to vary on the basis of gender, with boys being more likely to be supported in problem solving and active responsibilities than girls (Peters, 1994). These outcomes could be expected to be amplified within a religious context where rigid expectations of gender roles frequently exist and are clearly enforced.

Literature Review:

God Concept and Parenting Style

Numerous studies have shown images of both the father and mother to be influential in a person's understanding of God. Some studies have further found the image of the preferred parent to be of greater influence than the other parent (see Brokaw & Edwards, 1994). The extent to which the parent is influential on their child's self-esteem also relates to parenting style (see Buri, 1989). This study examines the relatedness of levels of parental nurturance and levels of parental authority as perceived by the son or daughter to that child's conception of God.

Parental Authority: Permissiveness

Permissive parents are those who use little discipline and give their children excessive freedom by making few requests and allowing them to determine their own activities. Gonzalez, Greenwood, and WenShu (2001) examined the literature and concluded that children raised by permissive parents tend to lack independence, are less capable of handling frustrations, and are more likely to give up on learning tasks. Such tendencies demonstrate a refusal to take responsibility and a deference of blame onto forces other than oneself.

Parental Authority: Authoritarianism

Authoritarian parents are characterized as those who are highly demanding of their children and employ strict discipline, valuing obedience and greatly limiting the amount of verbal negotiation between parent and child. Children of authoritarian parents are more likely to depend on authority figures to make decisions, are less likely to seek out new and challenging situations, and are performance-oriented, though they experience less aptitude for enjoyment of work activities (Gonzalez et al., 2001).

Parental Authority: Authoritativeness

Authoritative parents are those who place reasonable demands on their children and are willing to compromise with and encourage the vocalization of complaints, though they are not bound by the child's opinion. They are not controlled by the child as is the permissive parent, but they are not dictatorial in their discipline as is the authoritarian. Authoritative parents encourage self-sufficiency by placing expectations on the child while simultaneously offering guidance and a willingness to help. These parents raise children who are autonomous and willing to attempt new experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2001).

Parental Nurturance

Parental nurturance refers to the parents' approval and support of their children. Consistent with the findings of numerous studies, Buri (1989) found parental nurturance as measured by the Parental Nurturance Scale to be significantly related to self-esteem scores on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale.. Self-esteem's evidenced relation to God image (as will be discussed below) provides reason to believe that parental nurturance may be related to God image as well.

Method:

Participants

Participants were 61 female and 29 male self-selected students attending the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. No restrictions were made regarding race, ethnicity, etc., but all were 19 years of age or older. Participants were recruited through these fall, 2005, classes: Psychology of Gender, Science and Religion, and Intro to Women's Literature. Ninety packets were returned of the 122 handed out (74% return rate).

Materials

Participants were given a packet of materials that included instructions, informed consent forms, a questionnaire, and a debriefing form. Questionnaires included:

- Personal Background Information
- Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1989)
- Parental Nurturance (PNS; Buri, 1989)
- Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI; Hall & Edwards, 2002)
- Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1972)

Procedure

Surveys were picked up in a classroom and completed at the participant's leisure in a location of their choice to either be sent back to the researcher in the envelope provided via campus mail or handed to the researcher in person.

Findings:

- As hypothesized, students with permissive parents reported lower levels of Awareness and Realistic Acceptance in relation to God.
- Contrary to prediction, students with permissive parents did not have higher scores on the Disappointment subscale of the SAI.
- As hypothesized, students with authoritarian parents had higher scores of Instability or Disappointment in God on the SAI.
- Contrary to prediction, students with authoritative parents did not have higher scores for Awareness, Realistic Acceptance, or Disappointment in God on the SAI.
- Contrary to prediction, students with more nurturing parents did not have higher scores for Awareness and Disappointment in God on the SAI.
- Contrary to prediction, males and females did not differ in their concepts of God.
- As hypothesized, femininity scores were positively correlated with the Awareness and Impression Management subscales of the SAI. Masculinity scores on the BSRI were negatively correlated with the Awareness, Instability, and Impression Management subscales of the SAI.