Children’s God Concepts: Influences of Denomination, Age, and Gender

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Children (N = 968, ages 3–18) from eight Christian groups drew pictures of God. Analyses investigated their use of symbols and deity gender. Age-related results indicate a linear increase in the use of symbols with age. Also, youngest and oldest participants drew more “neuter” figures in contrast to the masculine images of the middle children. Group membership was not found to directly influence symbolism. Exploratory analyses suggest denominational differences in how girls perceive the deity.

Early efforts to understand children’s concepts of God concentrated on obtaining verbal responses to a fixed set of questions (Harms, 1944). In reaction, Harms gathered both oral and pictorial representations of God and religion, ultimately noting three major stages of God concepts, evolving from concrete to abstract in content (see Fowler, 1981). An advantage of using the pictorial approach is that general deficits in children’s verbal responses (Russell, 1954) are ostensibly ameliorated when children are encouraged to describe their thoughts about God using pictures (Graebner, 1964).

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Studies examining the God concepts of subgroups within one particular community of faith have either been fairly limited in scope (e.g., comparing Protestants and Catholics as in Nye & Carlson, 1984) or provide more impressionistic than empirically detailed analyses of many results (Pitts, 1976, 1977). This is noteworthy because religious subgroups are frequently contrasted and are generally assumed to possess discrete belief systems. Although this may be true for adults with more or less established theologies, if intrareligion uniqueness is indeed strong and discrete, it should be progressively evident in children's God concepts.

This study addresses these potential differences with special attention on how children use symbols and gender to understand God. The focus is on eight distinctive Christian groups. Following Harms's (1944) lead, we studied the children's use of three types of symbols: religious (e.g., crosses, stars, altars), nature (e.g., landscapes, animals), and power (e.g., lines or fire, emanating from figures). We also recorded the gender of each representation.

Cognitive theory's emphasis on development across age from less to more abstract thinking capabilities (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) suggests a linear progression from less to more usage of symbolism. It is likely that additional dissimilarities are observable between groups within the same religious tradition. For example, they may or may not adhere to seasons (e.g., Lent or Pentecost) with the attendant displays and may either welcome or shun the use of icons.

Regarding the gendering of God, minimal guidelines are again drawn from the principles of cognitive theory regarding chronological movement from concrete to abstract thinking patterns (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969): The youngest do not yet possess an adequate understanding of the topic; middle children discover and use gender as a tool of classification; older children are able to entertain ideas such as androgyny or even the absence of gender. Intrareligion groups frequently ascribe to divergent teachings regarding deity gender. If efficacious, these teachings should be reflected in the children's concepts of God.

We anticipated main effects of age on the use of symbols and also figure gender (i.e., children will portray God as more gender neutral at the youngest and oldest chronological ages). Further hypothesized were main effects of group membership on the use of the three symbol types and representations of figure gender.

Finally, if intrareligion differences are present, they should become more manifest in the later stages of the child's developing God concept. This led us to predict an interaction between age and group membership, reflective of the children's increasing tendency to display group norms pertaining to the use of symbols and the gendering of the deity.

Previous research typically does not report whether gender influences God concepts (e.g., Harms, 1944; Pitts, 1976). However, Donahue and Benson (1995) reported greater religiosity among women than among men. They further noted that although women were more intrinsically oriented toward religion than were men, no gender differences were observed on extrinsic measures. These observa-
tions lead us to believe that gender differences are likely, although no specific hypotheses were generated regarding how these might influence God concepts.

METHOD

Sample

Participants were 968 children, ages 3 to 18, from eight Christian groups: Southern Baptist (n = 25), Lutheran (ELCA; n = 66), Nazarene (n = 50), Pentecostal (Four Square Gospel & God's Lighthouse; n = 33), Presbyterian (U.S.; n = 36), Roman Catholic (n = 684), United Church of Christ (UCC; n = 57), and United Methodist (n = 17). Their mean age was 9.6 years. Girls numbered 532 (55%).

Procedure

Teachers administered this exercise during their religious education classes. For all churches except one, this occurred on a Sunday morning. The Roman Catholic participants completed the task during a weekday at their private school, providing an unexpected return (71% of the total sample).

The children were asked to draw a picture of God. They were also asked to provide a brief description of their drawing to help the coders avoid erroneous interpretations (Tamminen, 1991). Verbal explanations from the youngest children were written down by the instructors. The pictures were then judged by four raters on the dependent variables (three categories of symbol usage [1 = absence, 2 = presence] and figure gender [1 = male, 2 = neuter, 3 = female]) utilizing both the drawn and written records to clarify categorization. Interrater reliabilities ranged from .75 to 1.00.

Scale Construction

Initially, Pearson correlations were calculated among the following dichotomous dependent variables: religious symbolism, nature symbolism, and power symbolism. All were significant at p < .01 (1 with 2 = .25; 1 with 3 = .40; 2 with 3 = .21) so they were combined to form a single scale, Symbols (Cronbach α = .57; range = 1.00–2.00).

A multivariate analysis of variance using as dependent variables symbols and figure gender, and as independent variables age, group, and participant gender was planned. Unfortunately, some of the Group × Age cells were too small to perform such an analysis accurately. To obtain appropriate cell sizes (n > 10), two steps were taken. First, the ages were broken into three ranges (3–6, n = 174; 7–11, n = 496; 12–18, n = 298) roughly corresponding to preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational levels of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).
Second, the religious groups were placed in three discrete clusters (affiliation) according to affirmations of conservatism (Schuller, 1980). The first cluster (least conservative) was comprised of Presbyterian (U.S.), UCC, and United Methodist children \((n = 110)\). The second cluster (moderately conservative) combined Roman Catholic and ELCA participants \((n = 750)\). Nazarenes, Pentecostals, and Southern Baptists were placed in the third cluster (most conservative, \(n = 108\)).

**RESULTS**

**Age Range: Main Effects**

A multivariate main effect of age range was observed, \(F(4, 1898) = 6.65, p < .001\). Univariate tests revealed that both symbols, \(F(2, 950) = 9.31, p < .001\), and figure gender, \(F(2, 950) = 4.55, p < .05\), were influenced.

Supporting our hypothesis, use of symbolism displayed a linear increase across age. Both middle \((7–11; M = 1.81)\) and oldest participants \((12–18; M = 1.85)\) utilized more symbols than did the youngest \((3–6; M = 1.75)\), \(t(497.74)^1 = 4.18, p < .001; t(458.36) = 5.24, p < .001\) (family-wise\(^2\) a critical value = .017).

Sustaining the additional expectation, both the youngest children \((3–6; M = 1.62)\) and the oldest \((12–18; M = 1.59)\) tended to draw more gender-neutral images in comparison to those in the middle age group \((7–11; M = 1.43)\), who portrayed God as more masculine, \(t(363.89) = 4.06, p < .001; t(792) = 3.42, p < .001\) (family-wise a critical value = .017).

**Affiliation: Main Effects**

The hypothesized main effect of affiliation on use of symbols was not supported. Likewise, the anticipated main effect of affiliation on figure gender did not receive direct support; exploratory findings (see following section on participant gender) do, however, raise questions regarding the relation between group membership and deity gendering by children.

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\(^1\)When doing \(t\) tests, homogeneity of variance was tested with an \(F\) test. If the hypothesis of equal sample variances had to be rejected, a separate variance estimate was employed; otherwise the estimate used was that of pooled variance. If separate variances were used, degrees of freedom were altered by the statistical program (SPSS-X) to deal with heteroscedasticity, resulting in decimals in the degrees of freedom. All tests are two tailed.

\(^2\)When referring to significance levels adopted for a collection of \(t\) tests between levels of one factor, we have adopted the vocabulary explained in Glass and Hopkins (1984): "The term experimentwise error is commonly used synonymously with family error rate, but this terminology is confusing when there are two or more factors .... We ... consistently use the expression family error rate, or error rate per family" (p. 373).
Age by Affiliation Interaction

No Age × Affiliation interaction was revealed, contrary to our hypothesis.

Participant Gender: Exploratory Findings

In only one case was participant gender specifically influential. A two-way interaction of Participant Gender × Affiliation was displayed, $F(4, 1898) = 4.28$, $p = .002$. The associated univariate tests indicated that only figure gender was affected, $F(2, 950) = 6.08$, $p = .002$.

To explore this finding in greater detail, we sought to regain full use of data suppressed by the combinations used for the affiliation (less–more conservative) measure. An analysis of variance was conducted using figure gender as the dependent variable with participant gender and group (all eight separately) as independent variables.\(^3\)

The two-way interaction was significant, as expected, $F(7, 952) = 2.81$, $p < .007$. A borderline main effect of group was present, $F(7, 952) = 1.87$, $p = .07$; this was not pursued because we were already involved in post-hoc analyses and the $F$ value was relatively low. The main effect of participant gender, $F(1, 952) = 24.45$, $p < .001$, attained significance, suggesting that boys drew more gender-neutral figures as compared to the more masculine pictures drawn by girls ($Ms = 1.62$ and 1.42, respectively).

On the basis of the interaction observed, post-hoc analyses of figure gender responses were conducted using the Tukey technique. The first analysis probed possible between-group deity gender differences of boys. No differences were found.

The second analysis concentrated on deity gender differences between girls in the eight separate groups. Significant differences were observed in two of the Tukey comparisons: Catholic ($M = 1.35$) and ELCA ($M = 1.43$) girls drew significantly more masculine pictures than did their UCC ($M = 1.82$) counterparts. This analysis, although exploratory, offers tentative support for our hypothesis that group membership may influence children's gendering of God, perhaps especially for girls.

It is noteworthy that a main effect of participants gender was not found when the data were divided along a more–less conservative dimension; when each group was allowed to stand alone the main effect asserted itself. This may have been a result of unequal sample sizes, although cautious analytic techniques were employed to avoid such a spurious influence. The implications for use of broad categorizations are obvious.

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\(^3\)One cell had only 5 cases; all other cells had more than 10 cases.
DISCUSSION

Although these results provide an intriguing picture, it is important to note that 55.7% of all figures were classifiable as masculine, 37.5% as gender-neutral, and 6.8% as feminine. Very few cases were as vivid as the 12-year-old UCC girl who added the caption, "I think God is a girl and she is being crucified," to her depiction of a figure on a cross. The traditionally masculine interpretation of the Christian deity is still quite strong among children of all the groups studied.

Both age-related results are in keeping with Piaget and Inhelder's (1969) basic observations regarding developmental shifts in ability to mentally use and manipulate abstract concepts. Whether these shifts are best explained in terms of Piagetian theory or via less strict theories of cognitive development remains to be seen (Reich, 1995).

Intrareligion differences in the use of symbols may have been generally overshadowed by a progression of cognitive abilities that allow children to use such representations more freely with age. More sensitive measures may be needed to evaluate distinct aspects of symbolism. Discrete indexes of nature, power, and religious symbols might be an initial point of refinement. Here, too, the results may have been altered due to the consolidation of the eight groups into three broad clusters.

The lack of an interaction involving age and affiliation implies that, regarding the use of symbols and the gendering of God, children do not tend to pick up their group's norms as they grow older. A different interpretation is that the group norms regarding these practices may not be as divergent as initially supposed. Children may ascribe to group norms more strongly as they age, but those norms may be very similar.

Why girls appear to perceive the deity as more male than do boys may be considered from several perspectives. It has been argued that, in comparison to men, women are more relational in orientation (Gilligan, 1982), more concerned about others' opinions (Block, 1973), more religious (Ozorak, 1989), and more intrinsically oriented toward that religion (Donahue & Benson, 1995). Such attributes may prompt young women to ascribe more closely to group traditions (i.e., masculine God) in religious settings. Conversely, men from an early age may treat religious affiliation as less normative in their lives, and are thus less likely to affirm the religious attitudes of their group.

A related possibility is that holding closely to tradition may also give these young women a sense of vicarious empowerment (Spilka, 1972). Young men may take for granted their inclusion in the perceived power structure, thereby being freed to view God as gender-neutral while maintaining a sense of efficacy.

Another perspective notes that individuals simply tend to emphasize the most readily salient aspects of themselves (McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979). A young woman in a group of elderly women notices that she is young; a singular woman in a group of men notices that she is a woman. It is possible, then, that as
a result of tradition (i.e., masculine deity), the young women readily identify God as an entity of differing gender.

God concepts appear to make strange bedpartners of some religious traditions. For instance, when compared directly, on none of the variables examined are the Southern Baptist and UCC participants significantly distinguishable, although the former is typically thought of as much more conservative than the latter. Perhaps intrareligion idiosyncrasies are expressed through specific tenets (e.g., members’ roles, relation to other groups), whereas overarching concerns (e.g., the need to use symbols to attempt an explanation of the deity and deity gendering) remain relatively stable across the religion.

Many questions remain unanswered regarding how particular God concepts relate to overall religious concepts. Attribution theory (Spilka, Shaver, & Kirkpatrick, 1985) and schema theory (Ladd, Spilka, & David, 1992; McIntosh, 1995) are two approaches already in use in psychology of religion research that may provide beneficial frameworks for investigations. Such further attempts to understand how these concepts arise, develop, and mature may clarify how and why many allegedly separate paths so frequently converge.

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