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Development of the God Concept in Children: An Exploratory Study

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Dennis Patrick

1976

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GOD CONCEPT IN CHILDREN:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Psychology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Dennis Patrick Feeley

August 1976

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GOD CONCEPT IN CHILDREN:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE GOD CONCEPT IN CHILDREN:

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Dennis P. Feeley

August 1976

44 pages

Directed by: Dorsey Grice, Sam G. McFarland, and Lois Layne

Department of Psychology

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A study was designed to explore the developmental relationship between early childhood concepts of parent and more adult concepts of God. It attempted to identify the age at which absolute attributes such as omnipotence and ubiquity are taken away from parents and assigned to God. Based on both the theories of Freud and Piaget it was predicted that the transition will occur between the ages of four and eight. Forty children were administered an interview questionnaire and two short stories all of which depicted an attribute or characteristic which is traditionally viewed as being associated with God. Both techniques were of a projective nature. Subjects were divided according to age and sex and were from middle class home environments. Subject's responses to the techniques were divided into three categories: God, Parent, and Other. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed by means of a two-way analysis of variance for each category: God, Parent, and Other with age and sex as independent variables. Data for the stories were analyzed for each story by a

3 X 2 chi-square test for categories God, Parent, and Other with the age groups being (4 & 5) and (6 & 7).

Results for the questionnaire indicated that the data supports the hypothesis that absolute characteristics of protection, omnipotence, and ubiquity are reassigned from Parent to God between ages 4 and 7.

Since the present study was largely exploratory in nature, a number of procedural and methodological controls which need to be added are discussed.

Chapter I

Literature Review

Religion is one of the most important aspects of culture studied by Anthropologists and other social scientists. In the majority of religious traditions, e.g., Judeo-Christian, the central theme is that of God. Anthropologists to date have not reported a people anywhere in the world that is without religion (Jarvie, 1972), and only in certain cases is the concept of God either absent or only in a secondary role (Durkheim, 1915).

Numerous theoreticians and researchers have tried to comprehend and explain the psychological characteristics of the God concept. However, only two theories provide the kind of theoretical framework which make it possible to predict the pattern and age at which such a concept should emerge. These are the theories of Freud and Piaget. Both are stage theories which rely heavily on maturational concepts and emphasize qualitative structural changes which are age typical. Social learning theory, the popular alternative to the stage theories in American psychology, has fostered little research on the God concept. We shall focus on the two major theories; Freud and Piaget.

Freud

Freud offers a definitive explanation of religion and the concept of God. He developed his theory based on totemism, myth, and magic. Bidney (1953) points out that Freud had combined a symbolic interpretation of the Oedipus myth of Sophocles with a Darwinian ethnological myth of his own to account for the universal "Oedipus Complex".

The central theme of the Oedipus Complex is that of the young boy "who regards his father as a competitor for the favors of the mother, towards whom the obscure foreshadowings of his budding sexual wishes were aimed" (Freud, 1952).

Charles Darwin's hypothesis upon the state of primitive men, deduced from the habits of the higher apes, stated that men, too, originally lived in comparatively small groups or hordes. Within these groups the jealousy of the oldest and strongest male prevented sexual promiscuity. When the young male grows up, a contest takes place for mastery. The strongest establishes himself as the head of the horde by killing and driving out the others (Freud, 1952).

In his writings in Totem and Taboo (1952), Freud combines the theory of the Oedipus Complex and that of Darwin's evolutionary theory. Freud assumes that in primeval times men lived in small hordes, each under the domination of a strong male. This male was the master and father of the whole horde having unlimited power which he

used brutally. All females were his property. The fate of the sons was a hard one. If they excited his jealousy they were killed, castrated, or driven out. Freud theorized that the brothers who had been driven out banded together and overcame the father; and, according to the custom of those times, all partook of his body. The cannibalistic act thus becomes an attempt to assure one's identification with the father by incorporating a part of him. The totem feast was the repetition and commemoration of this first criminal act which, Freud states, marked the beginning of social organization, moral restrictions, and religion. Murder and incest, the two basic crimes of primitive society, correspond with the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus Complex.

Freud explained that the sons attempted a reconciliation with the father which involved trying to appropriate the father's good qualities. This in turn led to a search for the father image. It is out of this search that the idea of God arose; and, within this, Freud found the source of religion. He believed that these processes take place on the unconscious level or perhaps acted out in symbolic fashion in the Oedipus conflict as they would be in religious ritual.

In Freud's later writings, The Future of an Illusion (1973), he offered further theory concerning the origin of religion and the concept of God. He explained that the

libido or goal directing energy of the individual followed the paths of narcissistic needs. The individual attached himself to the objects which would ensure the satisfaction of those needs. In this way the mother, who satisfies the child's hunger, becomes its first love-object and also its first protection against any dangers in the world (Freud, 1973).

This function of protection in the mother is soon replaced by the stronger father who retains this position for the rest of childhood. The child's attitude toward his father is influenced by a particular ambivalence which is based on the child's earlier relation to the mother. The child then fears his father as well as longing for and admiring him. Freud states that as the individual ages he eventually realizes that he is "destined to remain a child forever," and that he needs protection from whatever strange superior powers might arise. At this point he transfers those powers and features belonging to the father. In so doing he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to please, and to whom he entrusts his protection (Freud, 1952). As Clark (1958) interpreted it, Freud tended to see religion in its more infantile aspects or as an actual retreat to infancy. Freud explained that the roots of the need for religion are found in the parental complex. That is, the almighty and just God and kindly Nature are grand sublimations of father and mother

which are restorations of the young child's ideas of them. Biologically speaking, Freud traced religiousness to the small human child's infantile helplessness. In later life, he perceives how truly forlorn and weak he is when confronted with the great forces of life. At that time he feels his condition as he did in childhood and attempts to deny his own despondency by a regressive revival of the forces which protected his infancy.

Freud contends that the basis of religion lies in the unconscious, wholly below the threshold of awareness (Allport, 1950). Being in the unconscious, it is truly beyond the reach or scrutiny of introspection as William James (1935) employed. Freud maintained that the most basic element of the religious life is the search for the father. He proposed that the individual's conception of God is in every case modeled after the father. Man's personal relation to God is dependent upon his relation to his own physical parent. "God is nothing but an exalted father" (Freud, 1952). In at least eight of Freud's major works he makes reference to the God figure being equated with man and/or the father (Freud, 1952, 1955, 1957, 1959, 1962, 1964, 1967, 1973). Freud has suggested then, both phylogenetically and developmentally, the possible origin of the concept of God and possibly how this is repeated in each successive generation.

Related Research

Nelson and Jones (1957) attempted to apply an adaptation of the Q-sort (Stephenson, 1953) procedure to an investigation of certain aspects of Freud's hypothesis. They used descriptive patterns of the concept of God, Jesus, mother and father. Upon comparing these patterns they concluded that the concept of God appeared to be more similar to the mother concept than to the father concept for the subjects used. The researchers concluded that "it would appear that the mother is more influential in the formation of the deity concept than is the father concept." The subjects comprised persons of Protestant faith, all of whom were students in a church-related college of liberal arts.

Using a different group of religiously trained Protestant students, Strunk (1959) conducted a follow-up study on that of Nelson and Jones also using the Q-sort procedure. He found that the concept of God was more similar to the concept of the father than the mother, therefore supporting the Freudian thesis.

Vergote (1969) investigated the relation between images of God and of parents with special attention to the differences between maternal and paternal characteristics. An adaptation of the Semantic Differential Test was used. On 36 characteristics, 18 maternal and 18 paternal, arranged randomly, the subject's task was to rate on a seven point

scale which characteristic they associated with parent or with God. Samples consisted of American Roman Catholic students divided equally between college and high school, liberal arts and science majors, males and females; a Dutch speaking Belgian sample consisting of technology students; a French speaking Belgian sample consisting of science professionals and students and a literary group. Vergote concluded general support for the Freudian Oedipal theory, and that the paternal or father image is the most adequate symbol for the image of God, as it contains essential attributes of the father. However, there is also evidence that the God concept is not exclusively based on paternal characteristics, but may also contain certain maternal values.

Swickard (1963) used factorially dimensionalized God concepts and data obtained from students at the University of Denver. He demonstrated some suggestive evidence that the God image cannot be validly concluded more similar to one parental concept than the other. Using a sample approximately ten times the size of the previous studies in this area, plus factorially dimensionalized God concepts, Swickard failed to reveal more significant correlations or higher mean coefficients with God concepts for either mother or father.

These trends in research lend only partial support to the Freudian hypothesis that the God concept is in every

case modeled after the father and that it is dependent upon the relation to this parent. What is suggested, however, is that terms sometimes attributed to God may also be attributed to either father or mother.

Piaget

An alternative but similar explanation of the God concept comes from Jean Piaget, who addresses the process in terms of both parental influence and cognitive development. Piaget (1970) has distinguished four major stages of development and within each are numerous sub-stages. He provides very descriptive and detailed behavioral characteristics and capacities of each of these stages based on his research and observations with children. These stages are: Sensory-Motor stage (birth to age two); Pre-operational stage (two years to about seven years); Concrete Operations (seven years to eleven years); and Formal Operations stage (eleven years and upward).

The Preoperational stage is the beginning of conceptual thought. During this period the child develops linguistic skills and the ability to construct symbols or symbolic thought processes. His imitation becomes less overt and is increasingly internalized. More complex thoughts and images are constructed and the child develops the ability to conceptualize.

During the Preoperational stage, the child, although developing normally and quite rapidly, is very limited in

his abilities when compared to later stages. He is bound to his perceptions and motor actions and does not have the capacity for complex reasoning. He does not have the ability to base his thinking on purely logical processes. The child is bound to "things" and the content of an argument rather than the process. Since the child is tied to his perceptions, he is limited in the observations and manipulation of variables or dimensions of a situation. The young child views the world in a very simplistic and absolute manner. That is, he is animistic or displays a tendency to endow physical objects and events with the attributes of biological-psychological entities, e.g., to endow them with life, consciousness, will, etc. The young child is also artificialistic, in that he regards physical phenomena as products of human creation, e.g., to believe that single objects and events in the world were made by man for specific, anthropocentric purposes (Flavell, 1963).

Piaget (1929), while exploring the meanings and origins of child artificialism, often makes reference to the work of Pierre Bovet (1928). Both of these men's theories and research agree that child artificialism is the beginning of religious development in the child.

Piaget distinguishes between two kinds of personal religion, that which is either "acquired" (derived from the child's own interpretation of religious instruction) and that which is "spontaneous" (derived from the child's

own interpretation of religious experience). Both Piaget and Bovet concluded that this child artificialism cannot be explained solely by the pressure of education. "The child's real religion, at any rate during the first years, is quite definitely anything but the over-elaborated religion with which he is plied" (Piaget, 1929). And, as explained by Bovet, the notion of God, when imposed in the early stages of education, is useless and embarrassing to the child who sees his parent pitted against some unknown, abstract concept, God, whom he cannot see or touch.

Piaget and Bovet are in agreement in the results of their separate research which support Bovet's thesis, according to which the child spontaneously attributes to his parents the perfections and attributes which he later will transfer to God. From the beginning of his conscious life, the child is immediately dependent on his parent's activities for food, comfort, shelter, and clothing which is provided for him according to his requirements. The most natural idea for him is that all nature centers around him and it has been organized by his parents or in general by human beings. As is demonstrated in many of Piaget's interviews with children, they see the sun and moon and the sky as attributed to the activity of man, the most powerful and important of them being the parents (Piaget, 1929).

The young child spontaneously endows his parents with those attributes which theological doctrines assign to their God: sanctity, supreme power, omniscience, eternity, and even ubiquity. "When we endeavor to formulate the child's ideas of his father and mother, we find them to include the divine attributes of classical theology: omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection" (Bovet, 1928). It is then understandable why religious education in the early stages is a problem. The insistence on divine perfection means setting God as a rival to the parents.

During the stage of "Concrete Operations" the child begins to develop a critical ability and an ability to detect flaws in reasoning. It is during this period that the child usually discovers that his parents are not all omniscient. This crisis (Bovet, 1928), disillusionment (Gesell, 1949) or awakening (Elkind, 1974) necessitates a revision of his philosophic outlook. At this point, the feelings experienced by the child toward his parents must be shared or directed elsewhere, and it is at this period that Piaget points out that they are transferred to a God figure.

It becomes increasingly evident that both Freud and Piaget (in agreement with Bovet) have arrived at the common conclusion that the concept of God originates in and remains highly related to the child's experience of and conception of the parents. Available research supports this

association. However, there remains some differences between Freud and Piaget concerning the underlying dynamics of the transfer from parent to God.

As we have seen, Freud offers two explanations: the first in Totem and Taboo, relying heavily upon the guilt complex related to father hatred. This is explained phylogenetically in terms of the father-murder to obtain sexual privilege with his females and the subsequent guilt and need to restore the father and appropriate his attributes. This is achieved through religious ritual. Ontogenetically this is paralleled to the Oedipal crisis in which the child has destructive fantasies towards the father and experiences subsequent guilt. But the Ontogenetic discussion lacks one important component. Unlike the sons in the primeval hordes, the father is not actually destroyed even though he might be in fantasy. Therefore, there is no need to replace him. On the contrary the child identifies with the father and incorporates his attributes through imitation. With this strong and positive identification of a genuinely present father it is hard to understand why a substitute father is needed.

A later position by Freud, Future of an Illusion, relates the need for God in adults to a return to infantile needs for security. While it may be related, it seems on the surface, at least, to be different from the murder-guilt complex purposed earlier.

For Piaget and Bovet, the transition is structured in cognitive rather than emotive terms. The transition occurs as a consequence of cognitive growth and reduced egocentrism. As the child overcomes his egocentrism, he is able to objectify the power of his parents at least along concrete physical dimensions. At the same time, he can posit a substitute being endowed with these absolute powers. While he is not capable of truly abstract thought he has a capacity for rich fantasy of a somewhat concrete nature.

This raises the question: At each developmental period or stage, how capable is the child of conceptualizing an abstract concept such as God? According to Piaget, the child does not have the ability of purely abstract reasoning until the last stage, that of Formal Operations at about age twelve. Evidence points, out however, that the child does acknowledge the God concept, although quite naively, as early as the Preoperational stage ending around six or seven. Although most of the research on this question has used adult populations, the results suggest support for the hypothesis that subjects held similar attributes for God as they did for parents.

The purpose of this study is to explore the developmental relationship between early childhood concepts of parent and more adult concepts of God. If, as the previous review indicates, the attributes of God develop from the child's naive view of the parent, this transition should be

age typical. More specifically this study attempts to identify the age at which absolute attributes such as omnipotence and ubiquity are taken away from parents and assigned to God. In Piaget's theory, it is the Preoperational stage that language development begins and it can, therefore, be assumed that this is the earliest stage that the behavior in question could logically take place. In the stage of Concrete Operations the child reaches a new mastery of physical realities including the physical limitations of his parents. For this reason the period of transition from Preoperational to Concrete Operational thought is the predicted age for the change. Freudian theory, to the extent that it relies upon the Oedipal argument, would also point to the latter part of the pre-school years as the transition age. Therefore, the age range from four to seven has been chosen to be explored first. Stated hypothetically, when confronted with questions or situations in which divine attributes are implied, young children will relate them to the parent while older children will relate them to God. It is predicted that the transition will occur between ages four and eight.

Chapter II

Method

Subjects

The subjects were composed of children enrolled in two private, non-religiously oriented schools, in Bowling Green, Kentucky. One school was a day-care-center, which included pre-school and kindergarden, and the other was an elementary school also including pre-school and kindergarden.

The subjects were chosen on the basis of age and sex. Race was not considered in this study. Four age groups were used, 4, 5, 6, and 7 years of age. There were 10 subjects within each group, 5 males and 5 females, giving a total of 40 subjects. All subjects were from middle class home environments.

Materials

Two separate instruments employing different techniques were administered to all subjects in this study. Both of these techniques were of a projective nature and used open ended questions.

The subjects were first administered an interview questionnaire (Appendix A), consisting of seven questions based on some of the attributes or characteristics most often associated with God. These included protection,

forgiveness, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and law giver. The questions were short and concrete (as opposed to abstract) and required short concise answers. The subject's responses were recorded by the examiner for each question and time was allowed for as many responses as the subject wanted to offer. At no time was there any reference made to God or parent either by the questionnaire or the examiner.

Each subject was also presented with two short stories and related questions (Appendices B & C). Each story depicted an attribute or characteristic which is traditionally viewed as being associated with God. These included in story one the theme of protection and omniscience and in story two that of omnipotence. In both stories the theme was carried in the form of a plea for help on the part of the story character. Once the story was read to the subject, he was then asked to identify the character to which the plea was being made. The responses were recorded by the examiner for each of the two stories and time was given for as many responses as they desired to give.

Procedure

A male examiner administered the instruments to each subject individually and privately. He explained that he was doing a project for school and asked if they would like to help him by answering a few questions and then listening

to two stories. If a child did not choose to participate he was excused. However, all the children chose to participate.

It was important that at no time did the examiner mention the word "God" in any form, nor that of "Parent," mother or father. These words and concepts were intentionally absent from the instruments and the procedure so as not to influence the subject's responses.

The administration procedure was simple. The sequence of presentation was the same for each subject. The interview questionnaire was presented first, followed by the stories. During the interview questionnaire, the examiner asked the questions in a straight forward manner in numbered sequence, recording each response. No help was given except to repeat the question. Next, the stories were read to each subject in the same manner. Both stories ended with a question to which the subject would respond. Each response was recorded and again no help was given except to repeat the question.

Scoring

The scoring procedures were for both instruments the same. The responses were recorded as given by each subject. These responses were then tabulated by age group into three categories: God, Parent, and Other. Those responses placed in the God category included such things as: God, Jesus, Lord, Holy Spirit, or anything relating to a Supreme

Being. The Parent category contained such responses as: mom, dad, and parent substitutes or guardians. The Other category included those responses not falling into the previous two categories. It included such movie and television heroes as: Steve Austin (the Six Million Dollar Man), Super Dad, Mr. Universe, Superman, Dracula, Shazam, and the Super Friends.

Chapter III

Results

Data Analysis

Treatment of the data collected from the Interview Questionnaire involved a two-way Analysis of Variance as illustrated by Edwards (1968). This was conducted for each of the three response categories under observation: God, Parent, and Other. The independent variables across all three were the same, Age and Sex. A .05 level of significance was used.

The data collected from the two stories was treated separately for each story. A 3 X 2 Chi-Square Test as outlined by Edwards (1968) was used. The variables of God, Parent, and Other were compared against the four original age groups which were collapsed into two groups, that of (4 & 5) and (6 & 7).

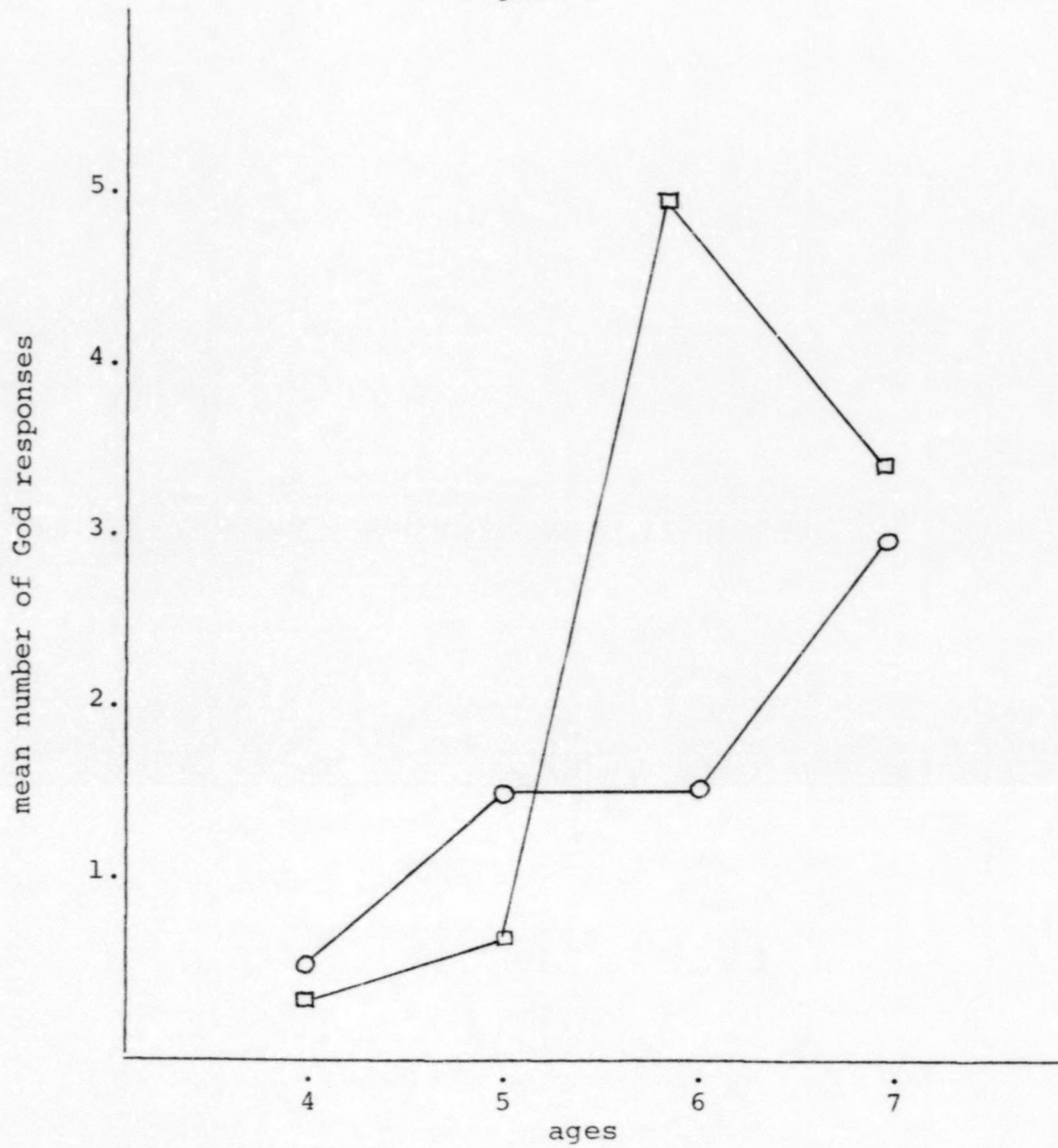
Questionnaire

The number of God responses was totaled to yield a single score for each child with a possible range of 0-7. A two-way ANOVA of these scores shows for the God category a significant main effect for age (Table 1). There was no significant main effect for sex. There was a significant age X sex interaction (illustrated in Figure 1). A similar

Table 1
 Analysis of Variance
 God Responses on the Questionnaire
 as a Function of Age and Sex

Source	df	ms	F	P
Total	39	3.96		
Between Subjects	7	13.425		
Age (A)	3	22.092	11.62	> 0.0001
Sex (B)	1	4.22	2.22	> 0.1422
A X B	3	7.82	4.11	> 0.0140
Within Subjects (Error)	32	1.90		

Figure 1



○ --- male

□ --- female

Mean number of God responses on the questionnaire
as a function of age and sex

analysis was conducted using Parent categories (Table 2). There was a significant effect on age, with no significant effect on sex and no significant sex X age interaction. This analysis adds little new information since the changes in the number of God responses must be reflected inversely in the category of Parent and/or Other. There were no significant effects in the Other response category (Table 3). Inspection of Figure 2 reveals that most of the increase in the number of God responses is reflected in a decrease in Parent responses. Only a slight proportion is reflected in the category Other.

This seems to support the hypothesis that the attributes in question are associated with the parents at earlier ages but they are increasingly assigned to God rather than Parent as the child reaches an age at which a more relativistic view of the parents is expected.

Stories

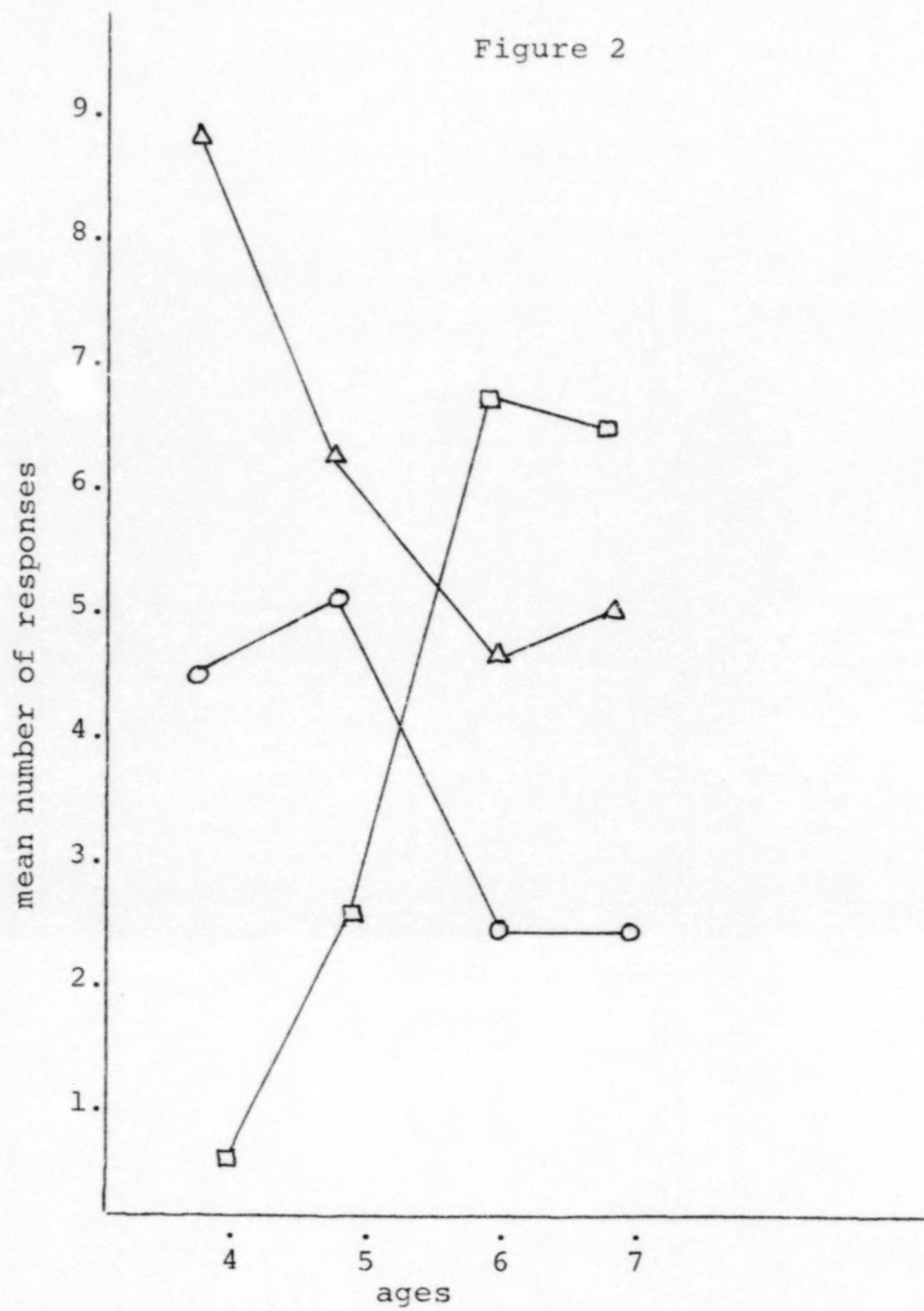
Separate chi-square analyses were made. The ages of 4 and 5 were collapsed into one category, ages 6 and 7 in the second category, in order to obtain expected frequencies of appropriate size. Because of the low expected frequencies sex differences were not investigated. For both story 1 and 2 there was a significant chi-square, with a significant effect across ages. Inspection of Tables 4 and 5 shows the number of God responses increases with age for both stories as the number of Parent responses decreases. This is

Table 2
Analysis of Variance
Parent Responses on the Questionnaire
as a Function of Age and Sex

Source	df	ms	F	P
Total	39	2.89		
Between Subjects	7	6.16		
Age (A)	3	8.95	4.11	> 0.01
Sex (B)	1	3.026	1.39	> 0.24
A X B	3	4.42	2.03	> 0.12
Within Subjects (Error)	32	2.17		

Table 3
Analysis of Variance
Other Responses on the Questionnaire
as a Function of Age and Sex

Source	df	ms	F	P
Total	39	1.77		
Between Subjects	7	2.50		
Age (A)	3	4.10	2.54	> 0.07
Sex (B)	1	0.10	0.06	> 0.80
A X B	3	1.70	1.05	> 0.38
Within Subjects (Error)	32	1.61		



- --- God
△ --- Parent
○ --- Other

Mean number of responses on the questionnaire
as a function of age

Table 4
Chi-Square Expected Frequencies for Story 1

	God	Parent	Other	Total
Ages 4 & 5	1	10	9	20
Ages 6 & 7	<u>11</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>20</u>
Total	12	12	16	40

$$\chi^2 = 10.89$$

Table 5
Chi-Square Expected Frequencies for Story 2

	God	Parent	Other	Total
Ages 4 & 5	4	10	6	20
Ages 6 & 7	<u>13</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>20</u>
Total	17	14	9	40

$$\chi^2 = 5.98$$

consistent with the questionnaire data and further supports the hypothesis that absolute characteristics of protection, omnipotence, and ubiquity are reassigned from Parent to God between the ages of 4 and 7.

Discussion

Since the present study was largely exploratory in nature, there were a number of procedural and methodological controls which need to be added before complete confidence on the reliability of the data obtained can be stated. Identified are two major areas of concern, the instrument and procedures employed, and the lack of information on sample characteristics.

The present study indicates that the questionnaire method has promise as an instrument to be used in the study of the origin of the concept of God. It was not the intent of the present study to develop and refine such an instrument; rather it was our intent to see whether the limited number of items which were employed would point to the development of such an instrument. An analysis of the items in the questionnaire indicate that not all items were equally useful. Age trends for the seven items are presented in Table 6. Items 1 and 5 do not appear to discriminate at all, while items 3, 4, and 7, show clear and consistent trends. If items 2 and 6 discriminate it is between ages four and five but not thereafter. Examination of the items themselves reveals a distinct difference in

Table 6
Age Trend for Seven Questions

	Ages							
	4		5		6		7	
	God Parent		God Parent		God Parent		God Parent	
Question 1	0	3	1	3	1	1	0	1
2	0	8	4	6	6	4	5	5
3	1	5	2	4	7	2	9	1
4	0	7	2	2	8	1	9	1
5	0	9	1	6	2	8	0	9
6	0	10	1	8	4	5	2	7
7	2	2	3	2	6	2	7	1

the type of item which discriminates with the effective items asking direct questions as to "who" possesses these attributes, "who" is the strongest (item 7), "who" knows everything (item 3), "who" sees everything (item 4). These items point to absolute powers. The other items attempt to relate to the child's experience or to a practical situation: "If you're lost who watches out for you?" (item 1), "Who forgives you?" (item 2), "Who decides what is right and wrong?" (item 5). None of these items necessitate the assumption of an absolute power and for all of them "parent" is a correct answer in terms of the child's experience. For all the children the parent is a protector, does forgive, and does make rules. On these items "parent" is a satisfactory answer for each age and reasonably so. Therefore, the concept of God is not favored. The discriminating items are those in which the older child's logic makes "parent" an unsatisfactory answer. An understanding of the limitations of the parents calls for a different response.

The stories, which were a more indirect method, involving an unidentified character who possesses attributes which might be attributed to either Parent or God, are promising also as an instrument to assess the child's concept of God. The first story was intended to deal with the question of omnipotence. The power over sickness and health is implicit in the concept of God's omnipotence and is revealed when we call upon God to restore health and

save life. While it is acknowledged that the concept of omnipotence is much broader and perhaps more eloquent than the present story indicated, it was nevertheless our attempt to deal with the particular instance of omnipotence operationalized. The simplification was necessary to make the story sufficiently simple for the child to understand it and respond to it. The data in this case is very clear, the young child seems to place power over matters of life and death in the hands of the parent and thus the plea for help is a plea to the parent. The older child on the other hand may understand the parent's vulnerability in matters of health and attributes those powers to God. The request is made as a prayerful call for God's help.

To date we have no test of validity or reliability for the stories except for their face validity and the consistency of the results using the stories when compared with the results of the questionnaire. The stories also have some construct validity in that the results are in accord with those predicted by the two major theories of child development, namely that of Piaget and Freud. In no case were either the answer Parent or God suggested to the child. Any use of either of those terms came from the child himself. There is, of course, the possibility of some confounding from one instrument to the other, since they were all administered in a single setting. For example,

the child who responded with the term God to a question in the questionnaire might then have a mental set including God which disposed him to make that choice in the story.

The second story places the emphasis on the omnipotence of God. Beth was lost and needed information. It is the Parent to whom the younger child turns for such information. The older child no doubt is conscious of the fact that the Parent is not present and, therefore, the plea for information is to some omnipresent being. Thus, there is in the second story a confounding between the concepts of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. For present purposes, however, the story serves well in that it, like the first story, reveals the transition from Parent to God in the plea for help.

It should be noted that both stories involve themes of coping or protection. Thus the data is consistent with Freud's claim that the concept of God originates out of a sense of need--a need which cannot be satisfied by limited beings, that an all knowing and all powerful being is required (Freud, 1973). It is in no way assumed that these stories exhaust or get to the main aspect of the God concept. But they do suggest that some aspects of the concept of God can be assessed in this manner. Further exploration with more refined instruments and procedures is yet to come.

The significant age by sex interaction is not easily explained. Inspection of Figure 1 clearly illustrates that the large number of responses for six year old girls produces the effect. None of the theories which are here discussed predicted such an outcome and therefore it has little theoretical relevance at this time. If, however, such a difference should persist in future samples, then a serious consideration of its meaning is mandated. Otherwise, the results obtained were expected but they do not constitute and decisive test of one theory, since a variety of theoretical positions would suggest the same results. Within Piaget's theory of cognitive development, such a result would be expected in view of the increasing cognitive powers of the child enabling him to understand an abstract such as God at the later age, while such an understanding would not be present at an earlier age. We must indicate that the concept of God employed here remains very concrete and in no way resembles the more sophisticated concepts of God to be found in mature adult experience. However, for the young child, even an imaginary being which is not immediately visible or audible is less likely to be called upon than a concrete being like Parent to whom the child turns in every circumstance. The age span involved constitutes a period of rich fantasy in the child during which time imaginary images can be developed. It also borders the onset of Operational thought, a stage in which a child

is able to go beyond the immediate data though he still thinks in very concrete forms. In Psychoanalytic theory, on the other hand, this is the stage during which the social mores and values of the parents are internalized by the child in the form of the Super-Ego. It is Freud's hypothesis that the child comes to call upon God because he perceives the vulnerability of the parent and thus lacks the security he once had in the naive trusting of the parent's sufficiency. If this is the case, then the concept of God should emerge at the expense of confidence in parents (Freud, 1973).

Since the data in this study was classified in three categories, Parent, God, and Other, it is instructive to see whether the increased number of responses in the God category was obtained at the expense of a decreased number of responses to Parent or whether it comes from a decreased number of responses to the Other category. Inspection of Figure 1 reveals that as the number of God responses goes up the number of responses for both the other categories decreases. Thus the increased number of God responses cannot be attributed entirely to the decreased number of Parent responses. However, when Figure 2 is carefully examined the category "God" is more closely mirrored by the category "Parent" than by the category "Other." Thus, answers in the God category in older children seem to replace answers of Parent in younger children more often than they replace answers from the Other category. The

fact that there is a decrease in the answers in the Other category with age does suggest that it may not be a simple transition from Parent to God. Since the age trend in the God category is opposite to the trend in the Other category, the concept of God seems to be distinct from other fantasy characters such as "Super Dad," or the "Six Million Dollar Man." Hero worship would seem to decrease with age while the concept of God increases. Any attempt to equate belief in God with childhood fantasies must be questioned in view of the present data.

For both Freud and Piaget the issue is one of increased differentiation of authority images as the child develops. Such differentiation characterizes all aspects of the child's development as has been lucidly explicated by Werner (1947) and others. The concept of psychological differentiation does not imply that the concept of God is achieved at the expense of the confidence of the parents in any simple fashion. Rather, it betrays an understanding of the limitations of the parent in his ability to satisfy the child's wishes. The concept of Parent is limited to what the child thinks can be done, while the concept of God reveals what the child wants done or what needs to be done. Both the concept of God and the concept of Parent will become further differentiated with age and we suspect there will be differentiation within the Parent concept and within the God concept.

It has been repeatedly suggested that the concept of God was obtained at the expense of the parent as an absolute. The present study is based in part on that position yet it is not totally verified. While the concept of God gains ascendancy at the age when the view of the parent is being relativized, the exact temporal relationship is not entirely clear. In the present study the older children responded God rather than Parent to the questions and stories. Two possibilities exist: one, the image of the parent as an absolute protector decays leaving a void which is filled with the concept of God; or two, the concept of parent does not decay so much as the concept of God becomes stronger not to fill a void but to compete with a still treasured concept. It is regrettable that the older children were not interrogated more thoroughly to determine whether they would also see parent as a reasonable answer. While the children were given the opportunity to give more than one answer, they were not specifically asked about alternatives. Thus we cannot be certain they would reject them. For example, it would be helpful to know if the seven year old would protest that Beth could not be talking to a parent because she was lost in the woods where the parents would not be able to hear her. While we favor the view that decay of the parent as an absolute protector takes place as the concept of God replaces it, precise verification of that awaits a subsequent study.

Social Learning Theory could also account for these findings if it could be shown that religious instruction for these children systematically occurred within this age period. The present study fails to control for religious instruction, though it is generally believed by the author that most of the children have at least a peripheral exposure to the concept of God through Sunday School, religious parents, or friends. A causal inquiry of four Sunday Schools of major churches in the community indicates that concepts of omnipotence and omniscience are present in the earliest discussion of God even before the age of four. If that tentative result should be confirmed in a careful study of the child's religious instruction, it would decrease the plausibility that the change at this particular age could be accounted for in terms of religious instruction. This is not to suggest that religious instruction is not an important part of the child's development of the concept of God. But it does suggest that the God concept follows other developmental lines which makes the instruction more meaningful and more easily assimilated at one time than another. While the child is not likely to be born with a concept of God, and he probably does not invent one on his own, he does begin to employ it more readily at a particular age. It is possible that this is because of religious instruction which begins at that age, but the tentative impression is that the change is due to a combination of

cognitive development factors which enable the child to understand the limitations of his parents and to see them in more realistic terms on one hand and to cognate a supernatural being-God on the other. If religious instruction is the key variable then we would expect differential results from children from varying religious backgrounds and various geographic locations. The present study was conducted in the mid-south which is characterized by Orthodox Fundamentalist Protestantism. However, the present sample involves children from two schools populated by children with academic parents. It would be dangerous to assume that the fundamentalism which characterizes much of the community is prevalent in the present sample.

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Appendices

Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. If you're lost who watches out for you or protects you?
2. If you do something wrong, who do you ask to forgive you?
3. Who knows everything (that you do)?
4. Who sees everything that you do?
5. If you do something wrong who says that it is wrong?
Who makes the rules?
6. When you're scared who will help you?
7. Who is the strongest in the world? Who can do everything?

Appendix B

STORY ONE

Scottie and Grover were best friends. As long as Scottie had his dog Grover with him, he was always happy. Grover followed Scottie everywhere. But, one day Grover didn't want to follow Scottie. He no longer wanted to run and play. He just lay in the grass with sad brown eyes and floppy ears. Scottie knew his dog Grover was very sick. Scottie needed help for Grover to make him well. "Please help Grover," Scottie said. "Please make him well so that he can run and play with me again." "He's my very best friend and I don't want him to be sick." "Please make Grover well."

Q. Who is Scottie talking to?

Appendix C

STORY TWO

Beth and Freddie met everyday in the woods behind their houses. Their parents knew they played at the edge of the woods, and had always told them to play and have fun. They also told them never to go past the creek or they might get lost deep in the woods. One afternoon Freddie was sick and unable to play with Beth. Beth went down to the woods by herself to play in the fort that she and Freddie had built.

Without thinking, Beth crossed the creek and wandered deep into the woods. Soon the sun was shaded by all the thick tree branches, and the woods grew dark and cool. Beth became frightened by the dark woods. She decided to go back home. When she tried to find her way back to the creek, she soon realized that she was lost. "Oh dear" she thought, "every path looks the same. I can't find my way back to the creek." "Who will help me find my way?"

Q. Who will help Beth find her way?