

## THE CONCEPT OF GOD AND FEELINGS TOWARD PARENTS

MARVEN O. NELSON<sup>1</sup>

*Rockland Community College*

The present study is a cross-validation of previous studies designed to test the Freudian hypothesis that God "is nothing but an exalted father." The previous results did not support this hypothesis but were more in accord with Adler's definition of "the idea of God . . . as concretization and interpretation of the human recognition of greatness and perfection" (1, p. 276).

More fully Freud had stated: "Psychoanalytic investigation of the individual teaches with especial emphasis that God is in every case modelled after the father, and that our personal relation to God is dependent upon our relation to our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him, and that God at bottom is nothing but an exalted father" (2, pp. 919-920).

To test this assertion we devised the Q-Test for Parent-Deity Concepts. The specific hypothesis derived from Freud was that the Q-sorts for God should correlate more highly with those for father than those for mother. A pilot study (4) with 16 subjects from a Protestant church-related college showed the reverse, namely, that the concept of God correlated actually more highly with mother ( $r = .43$ ,  $p = .01$ ), than with father ( $r = .15$ , not significant). In a second study with 20 similar subjects and using the same instrument, Orlo Strunk (6) found that both the concepts of father and mother were significantly correlated with the concept of God. A third, very thorough study by Father Andre Godin and Monique Hallez (3) used French speaking subjects (30 men and 40 women) in Belgium and a translation of the Q-test by Godin. The authors concluded that in general the correlations of the concept of God appear "stronger and more frequent with the maternal image among men, and the paternal image among women." However, when there is a marked preference for one parent the God concept correlates highly with the concept of the preferred parent (3, pp. 102-103).

---

<sup>1</sup>Author's address: Department of Psychology, Rockland Community College, Suffern, New York 10901.

Within the limitations of the instrument used, the results of both Strunk, and Godin and Hallez, indicate that the concept of God is more highly correlated with that of the preferred parent than that of the unpreferred parent, for both men and women. That is, the results do not support Freud's conception, and are more in accord with Adler's understanding on the concept of God.

The present study, more specifically, is an attempt to test further the Adlerian hypothesis, namely that the concept of God is correlated with that of the preferred parent.

PROCEDURE

*Subjects.* The *Ss* were 37 men and 47 women, aged 15 to 44 years, of whom 58 were college students, 24 high school students, and 2 adults. The *Ss* were in about equal numbers Catholic and Protestant, with 3 being Jewish. Ethnically, 20 were black and the remainder white Americans.

*Instrument.* The instrument was the Q-Test for Parent-Deity Concepts described in the pilot study (4), which follows the Stephenson technique (5). It consists of 60 statements such as, "I have a sense of being protected"; "I have a feeling that I am understood;" "I have a feeling this is someone who does not love me"; "I have a feeling that I am not always accepted." Each statement is typed on a 3" x 5" card, numbered on the back. The *S* is asked to sort out the 60 cards three times, in response to each of the following three incomplete sentences: "When I think of father, . . ."; "When I think of mother, . . ."; and "When I think of God, . . ."

The sorting is to be done on a nine-point scale, with the exact number of cards at each point as shown below. The responses are scored by assigning the value on the scale as the score for each statement in that position.

|               | Most like I feel |   |   |    |    | Least like I feel |   |   |   |
|---------------|------------------|---|---|----|----|-------------------|---|---|---|
| Scale:        | 0                | 1 | 2 | 3  | 4  | 5                 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| No. of cards: | 1                | 2 | 6 | 12 | 18 | 12                | 6 | 2 | 1 |

The *Ss* were also asked which parent they preferred or whether they had no preference.

*Statistical treatment.* For each *S* his God sort (score each statement had received on this sort) was correlated with his father sort (scores of the statements on this sort) and his mother sort. The obtained correlations were averaged for the various subgroupings according to sex and parental preference as shown in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in Table 1. They essentially confirm those of the previous studies. The mean God-concept correlation with the concept of the preferred parent was consistently higher

TABLE 1. MEAN GOD/FATHER AND GOD/MOTHER CORRELATIONS AND DIFFERENCES, ACCORDING TO SEX AND PARENTAL PREFERENCE OF THE SUBJECTS

| Subjects                   | N  | %  | Correlations            |                         |                         |
|----------------------------|----|----|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
|                            |    |    | God/<br>father          | God/<br>mother          | Differences             |
| Males: preferring father   | 5  | 14 | <i>37</i> <sup>a</sup>  | 14                      | 17                      |
| preferring mother          | 22 | 59 | 11                      | <i>32</i> <sup>*</sup>  | 21                      |
| no preference              | 10 | 27 | <i>40</i> <sup>**</sup> | <i>41</i> <sup>**</sup> | 01                      |
| total                      | 37 |    |                         |                         |                         |
| Females: preferring father | 11 | 24 | <i>46</i> <sup>**</sup> | <i>33</i> <sup>**</sup> | 13                      |
| preferring mother          | 15 | 32 | 14                      | <i>45</i> <sup>**</sup> | <i>31</i> <sup>*</sup>  |
| no preference              | 21 | 44 | <i>56</i> <sup>**</sup> | <i>59</i> <sup>**</sup> | 03                      |
| total                      | 47 |    |                         |                         |                         |
| Both above: pref. father   | 16 | 19 | <i>47</i> <sup>**</sup> | 27 <sup>*</sup>         | 14                      |
| preferring mother          | 37 | 44 | 12                      | <i>37</i> <sup>*</sup>  | <i>25</i> <sup>**</sup> |
| no preference              | 31 | 37 | <i>51</i> <sup>**</sup> | <i>53</i> <sup>**</sup> | 02                      |
| total                      | 84 |    |                         |                         |                         |

\* p = .05; \*\* p = .01. <sup>a</sup>The higher mean correlation is italicized.

than with that of the non-preferred parent, regardless of S's sex. The difference between these mean correlations was significant at the .05 level for females preferring mother, and significant at the .01 level for the combined group preferring mother.

When there was no preference between the parents, the God/father and God/mother correlations were equal, and higher than otherwise. If we take "no preference" between the parents as an indication of a more harmonious family than otherwise, we may conclude that in such a family both parents are seen closer to the ideal of perfection, which is God, than in the other families, with women seeing this more than men.

There was a general tendency to prefer mother (44% vs. 19%). This tendency was greater for the males (59% vs. 14%) than the females (32% vs. 24%). No-preference between the parents was more frequent among the females than the males (44% vs. 27%).

The tendency of the higher correlation of the God concept with that of the preferred parent is reasonably interpreted as supporting Adler's view of the concept of God as "concretization and interpretation of the human recognition of greatness" (1, p. 279) if we assume that the preferred parent is also perceived as an exemplar.

The data also show some preference for the parent of the opposite sex, especially among men, but there is no support for Freud's idea of the concept of God as the projection of the attitude toward one's father.

## REFERENCES

1. ADLER, A. *Superiority and social interest*. Ed. by H. L. & Rowena R. Ansbacher. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univer. Press, 1964.
2. FREUD, S. Totem and taboo. In *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. by A. A. Brill. New York: Modern Library, 1938. Pp. 807-930.
3. GODIN, A., & HALLEZ, MONIQUE. Parental images and divine paternity. In *From religious experience to a religious attitude*. Brussels: Lumen Vitae Press, 1964. Pp. 79-110.
4. NELSON, M. O., & JONES, E. M. An application of the Q-technique to the study of religious concepts. *Psychol. Rep.*, 1957, 3, 293-297.
5. STEPHENSON, W. *The study of behavior: Q-technique and its methodology*. Chicago: Univer. Chicago Press, 1953.
6. STRUNK, O. JR. Perceived relationships between parental and deity concepts. *N. Y. Univer. Psychol. Newsletter*, 1959, 10, 222-226.