Concept of God and Personal Meaning: Investigating the Perspective of Older Adults

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Abstract

The positive effects of spiritual and religious belief and practice (e.g. church attendance or prayer) and the experience of personal meaning on older adults’ well-being are well documented. However, the associations between specific beliefs about God’s character and specific means of existential resolution have received little attention. The current exploratory study investigated associations between a God Concept Rating Form, generated from open-ended responses to the question “What is God like?”, and Wong’s seven subcategories of personal meaning. A significant negative correlation is found between salience of belief in a judgmental God and the Personal Meaning Profile subcategories of self-acceptance, self-transcendence and relationship with others. Salience of belief about God’s expectations for human behavior is positively correlated with self-transcendence at a near-significant level. Salience of traditional Christian beliefs is positively associated with meaning-finding through religion. Viewing God in relational terms is not associated with greater self-acceptance.

Keywords: Personal Meaning, God Concept, Older Adults

1. Introduction

The multitude of published studies on interactions between religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, existential meaning, and physical and mental health, indicate that the field of psychology carries an active interest in these subjects. Koenig’s1 studies on the positive effects of religious beliefs and practices on physical and mental health, Ellison’s2 work highlighting the importance of religious faith in life satisfaction, and Fry’s3 findings that well-being is influenced most strongly by religious and spiritual activity and the experience of personal meaning, indicate that these subjects are important means to understanding life satisfaction and positive living in older age.

Despite psychologists’ active interest in the effects of religious and spiritual belief and practice on people’s sense of well-being or personal meaning, few studies have investigated the interaction of particular God concepts, or views of God’s character, and the experience of existential resolution. The current exploratory study seeks to understand this particular aspect of religious belief—the God concept—and its possible interactions with people’s constructions of personal meaning.

The current study focuses on God concepts and personal meaning constructions in people age 65 and older. Wagnild and Young4 identify meaningfulness, or the realization that life has purpose, as one of five theoretical areas that affect whether a person is able to adjust successfully to the aging process. The other four areas are equanimity, (the ability to look at life as whole and see both the negative and positive aspects of life), perseverance, self-reliance, and the understanding that some experiences in life must be faced alone.

Personal meaning is a major source of life satisfaction in the face of disability and loss that accompany older age5. Personal meaning also mediates the effects of mental illness in later life. Participation in a personal meaning intervention group can reduce older adults’ depressive symptoms6. Existential factors, along with physical health and
other components, contribute significantly to the prediction of depression in older adults. This is noteworthy when one considers that the rate of suicide in older adults in many countries is higher than the rate of suicide in adolescents and middle-aged adults, and it is estimated that 25 percent of older people experience mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse that are not part of the normal aging process. In a large-scale study that reviewed Medicare claims and interviews from 1992 to 1998, almost 41 percent of diagnosed, insured adults age 80 and older received no treatment for depression. In the same study, half of those in the sample who did not have supplemental insurance beyond the traditional fee-for-service Medicare coverage received no intervention for a depression diagnosis. Although older adults’ views of mental health care appear to be quite similar to those of younger adults, older adults may be less likely than younger adults to seek help for less serious mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, or bereavement.

In a British study, although physical frailty had a negative effect on mental health, the relationship developed through factors such as the loss of loved ones and acknowledgment of mortality. Participants also noted an increasing trust in God. Younger generations in the United States are not perceived spiritual self-efficacy predicted lower levels of loneliness and psychological distress. Religion may be more important in older populations because other coping mechanism and securities, such as health and social and financial resources, tend to decline in later years. Although it is not completely clear whether people become more religious as they age, or whether spiritual and religious involvement were emphasized more strongly in older adults’ formative culture, older age may bring a new set of spiritual needs and life questions that, while they were sufficiently answered and met in younger years, are not being sufficiently met and answered in later life.

Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, and Morgan found a trend of an expanding relationship with God and increasing religiosity over the life course. Although not all participants experienced an expanding relationship with God, for those who did the relationship developed through factors such as the loss of loved ones and acknowledgment of mortality. Participants also noted an increasing trust in God. Younger generations in the United States are not becoming noticeably less religious than today’s older adults, indicating that the investigation of the religious faith experiences of older adults today could have pertinence for older adults of the future.

Generally, it is concluded that religion and spirituality are beneficial and important, and perhaps particularly so, to older adults. As stated above, the decline of other resources may necessitate a stronger reliance on religious and spiritual resources for older adults. High religious commitment is linked to enhanced self-esteem and feelings of self-worth in older adults and levels of self-esteem are lowest among older people with the least amount of religious commitment. One study reported significant positive correlations between self-rated importance of religious beliefs and subjective claims of high levels of personal adjustment, happiness and health. Ai notes that older people today experience long, chronic illnesses versus the acute, infectious diseases of earlier times, creating an increased period of illness when they may benefit especially from spiritual or religious practice. In conjunction with Ai’s theory, religious coping strategies, such as putting trust and faith in God and prayer, were the most frequently mentioned strategies for dealing with difficult or stressful life events in adults age 55 to 80. Religious coping strategies accounted for 17 percent of the total spontaneously reported strategies and religious behaviors were used to cope in 26 percent of the difficult situations reported by participants.

As with personal meaning, religious and spiritual belief and practice have a positive effect on older adults’ mental health. One pilot study indicated that the use of a prayer wheel produced a significant decrease in anxiety in nursing home residents. Those who continued to use the prayer wheel six weeks after the initial intervention were significantly less depressed than those who quit using it. In a British study, although physical frailty had a negative effect on psychological well-being, spirituality, although weakly, predicted psychological well-being and moderated the negative effect of frailty on psychological well-being. In another study, older adults whose church attendance was reduced by physical health limitations experienced a negative effect on mental health. In older women, perceived spiritual self-efficacy predicted lower levels of loneliness and psychological distress.

Religious and spiritual belief and practice also have an important role in physical health outcomes. Studies cite the reduction of chronic pain and better immune function as two of many possible benefits. Specifically in older adults, those who frequently attend religious services experience delayed progression of physical disabilities. Older people who have higher self-rated salience of religion are more likely to use preventative health care services, including self-checks and health screenings.

The direction of the current work is different in two significant ways from previous studies: It investigates concepts of God, versus more popular measures of religiosity and spirituality, such as daily prayer or religious service attendance, and it strives to incorporate open-ended data, versus using only closed-ended measures. Generally, studies that examine religiosity and spirituality measure organizational religiosity, non-organizational religiosity, or subjective religiosity. Organizational religiosity is measured by participation in formal religious
institutions, such as frequency of church attendance. Non-organizational religiosity is a measure of practices that take place outside a formal religious structure, such as number of daily prayers. Subjective religiosity is a measure of the degree to which religious practice is ingrained in a person’s life. The current work departs from these paths with its emphasis on religious belief versus religious practice. Koenig’s metaanalysis of earlier research on the relationship between religion and mortality found 47 studies related to religious affiliation, 52 related to level of religiousness, one related to transcendental meditation and one to intercessory prayer. If Koenig’s findings exemplify the larger body of research surrounding religion and spirituality, God concept studies are underrepresented and the area of God concept is potentially under-researched.

In focusing on God concept, this study builds on the work of Pollner. Pollner found that people’s views about God are associated with well-being in different ways. For example, God may be viewed as ruler (master, king, judge), a relation (lover, mother, father, spouse, friend), or a remedy (redeemer, creator, liberator, healer). Pollner’s work showed perceptions of God as ruler were negatively correlated with global happiness, while perceptions of God in remedial terms were correlated positively with life satisfaction. In a similar yet distinct vein, the current work examines correlations between categories of God concept in comparison with categories of personal meaning, instead of measures of happiness and life satisfaction.

A second identifying feature of the current work is its insistence on incorporating open-ended data. This is a departure from Gorsuch’s seminal work in developing a God concept adjective checklist through factor analysis of earlier studies. Gorsuch’s work has been used in ensuing studies, including Maynard, Gorsuch, and Bjorck’s investigation of religious coping. Francis and Robbins also rely on closed-ended measures in their study of God images. Hutsebaut and Verhoeven found little difference between closed-ended Likert-rated responses and open-ended responses about God’s nature or character. Although open-ended data collection allows the individual to expound his or her views in that moment, it may not accurately or fully capture the individual’s perspective.

Taking this information into account, the current work uses both open-ended and closed-ended data collection, and acknowledges that neither method is without shortcomings.

Overall, it is hypothesized that different views of God will not be associated equally with all types of meaning-finding. That is, certain views of God will be more strongly associated with some ways of meaning finding than will others. The current study uses Wong’s seven areas of personal meaning as a measure of how meaning is experienced. Wong’s areas of meaning are achievement, relationship, religion, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, intimacy and fair treatment. Related to Pollner’s work, it is hypothesized that having a strong salience of judgmental aspects of God will associate negatively with self-acceptance. It is also hypothesized that viewing God in close, relational terms will be associated with greater self-acceptance. Further, it is hypothesized that having a strong salience of belief about God’s expectations for human behavior will be positively associated with self-transcendence. Finally, in light of other studies indicating the importance of religion in the experience of meaning in older adults, the researcher proposes that high salience of traditional Christian beliefs will be positively associated with meaning-finding through religion.

2. Methodology

2.1 participants

Twenty people from a small city volunteered to participate. One participant did not complete participation. Participants’ ages ranged from 67 to 87 years old, with a mean age of approximately 72 years. All participants were Christian. Seventeen identified themselves as Mennonites, one participant was affiliated with the United Methodist church, and one participant was Episcopal. All participants were Caucasian. Seven participants lived in a retirement community; twelve lived independently in the larger community. Participants were solicited through an announcement at a weekly educational program for older adults at Bethel College, as well as through announcements at a meeting of retired teachers and a meeting of a chapter of the American Association of University Women.

2.2 procedure

To fulfill the data collection process, participants completed two meetings. The meetings were separated by one week to allow sufficient time to prepare an instrument for the second meeting which utilized data from the first. Because of schedule conflicts, participants chose either a Wednesday to Wednesday group, or a Thursday to
Thursday group. At the first meeting, participants received and signed a statement of rights. Participants then completed Wong’s11 Personal Meaning Profile (PMP). No time limit was given for completing the questionnaire. Upon completing the PMP, as the first step in collecting participants’ God concepts, participants were given 15 minutes to respond in writing to the question, “What is God like?”35. Written directions emphasized that the question had no right answer. Rempel34 found no significant order effects for the presentation of the PMP and the written response to “What is God like?”

At the second meeting, participants completed the God Concept Rating Form, a questionnaire developed out of their responses to the question “What is God like?” At the end of the second session, participants were given the opportunity to discuss, in writing, their hypotheses about the study and to relate general reactions. They were also invited to discuss any questions or share comments with the researcher.

2.3 instruments

2.3.1 personal meaning profile

The PMP was developed from Wong’s participants’ responses when describing an ideally meaningful life. It is a 57-item instrument containing seven subscales related to subcategories of personal meaning: achievement, relationship, religion, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, intimacy and fair treatment. Items on the PMP are not distributed evenly across the subscales; the achievement subscale has the most items with 16, and the fair treatment subscale has the least number with four. Items are rated on a seven-point scale of agreement from “Not at all” to “A great deal.” Items include: “I strive to do my best in whatever I am doing,” “I believe in an afterlife,” and “I am enthusiastic about what I do.”

In a comparison with the Life Attitudes Profile (LAP), a measure with four dimensions indicating positive meaning (life purpose, life control, will to meaning and future meaning) and three dimensions indicating absence of positive meaning (death attitude, goal seeking, and existential vacuum), positive dimensions of the LAP were positively correlated with the PMP and negative dimensions were negatively correlated11. Cultural specificity towards white, educated individuals is cited as a weakness of the PMP11; however, the current participant sample fits within this demographic.

2.3.2 god concept rating form

The God Concept Rating Form was developed from participants’ open-ended responses to the question, “What is God like?” Written responses were transcribed into a Microsoft Word file. Participant numbers were removed, and responses were divided into smaller concept units. Often concept units of a response were simply individual sentences (e.g., “God is so big that words cannot describe Him.”); in cases where one sentence contained multiple conceptions of God, the longer unit was subdivided into individual concepts. The list of concepts was then combed for redundant items; multiple items saying the same thing were reduced to one item. Because the list was quite long—about 170 items—an attempt was made to reduce the number of non-specific items, or items whose gist was captured within other concepts. Items carrying similar conceptions were combined in an effort to reduce the total number (e.g., “God is loving” and “God is caring” were combined into “God is loving and caring.”). The final questionnaire contained 87 items. In all items, the neutral word “God” was substituted for gendered pronouns (e.g., “He invites us to communicate with Him through prayer” became “God invites me to communicate with God through prayer”). Statements, when pertinent, were made personal (“He wants us to respect ourselves and others” became “God wants me to respect myself and others”).

Participants in Rempel’s34 preliminary study with the God Concept Rating Form were inclined to respond in a true/false fashion, despite a five-point rating scale. Also, participants were confused by the instructions, which asked them to rate each statement about God from minimum importance to maximum importance, based on their views of God. In an effort to correct these shortcomings, the directions were revised and participants were asked to rate each item “according to how well each item describes what God is like for you”35. The rating scale was expanded from five to eight points in order to allow a greater variability of response. The ends of the scale were labeled as “Not at all” and “Extremely Well,” but intermediary points were unlabeled to allow participants greater freedom within the scale.
2.4 preparation of data for analysis

Items on the God Concept Rating Form were subdivided into 21 categories, using Hutsebaut and Verhoeven’s God concept categories as a starting point. The current work includes nine categories from Hutsebaut and Verhoeven: Higher Reality, Agnosticism, Relation, Unbelief, Positive Power, Transcendency, Horizontal-innerworldy, Immanence and Creation. Two modified categories, Adherence to Traditional Christian Contents and Denial of Traditional Contents were also included. Ten new categories were developed to capture the remaining items: Judgment, Providing, Unconditional Non-Judgment/Forgiveness, God does not have “negative” traits, God has a Direction or Plan, Conditional Positive statements, Positive Characteristics of God, Evangelism, God does not exert direct control on individual or world, and Jesus. The items on the God Concept Rating Form were not subdivided evenly across these scales. Relation had the most items with 17 statements. Higher Reality, God does not have “negative” traits, Evangelism, and Denial of Traditional Christian Contents each contained only one item. Inter-rater agreement for subdividing the 87 items on the rating form into the 21 categories ranged from about 60 percent to 66 percent for four external raters.

Items from the PMP and the God Concept Rating Form were entered into separate Excel files. For the PMP, mean scores for the seven subscales and a total meaning mean score were calculated. For the God Concept Rating Form, participants’ mean scores in each category were calculated by averaging their ratings on the items in each category. If data was missing on either form, the mean for the sub-category was calculated, taking into account fewer total responses in the category. The subcategorical means for both questionnaires were combined into one file and opened in Systat, a computer statistics package.

Scatterplots were created to compare each subcategory on the PMP, as well as the PMP total mean score, to each category from the God Concept Rating Form. Scatterplots indicating a “straight enough” linear association between categories were selected for further consideration.

Using Systat, Pearson correlations with a Bonferroni corrective were calculated for associations that fulfilled the “straight enough” requirement. Because of the stringency of the Bonferroni corrective and the relatively small sample, associations with a probability of .095 and below are considered in Table 1.

3. Data

As hypothesized, self-acceptance is strongly negatively associated with salience of belief in a judgmental God, $r(17) = -0.639, p < .05$. Greater salience of belief in God’s expectations for human behavior, as measured by the horizontal-innerworldly category, is positively associated at a near-significant level with greater self-transcendence, $r(17) = 0.432, p = 0.065$. Also as hypothesized, stronger salience of belief in traditional Christian contents about God is positively associated with religious meaning, $r(17) = 0.735, p < 0.005$. In contrast with the hypotheses, high salience of relational statements about God is not significantly associated with higher self-acceptance, $r(17) = 0.238, p = 0.326$.

The associations related to the hypothesis, as well as significant associations that fall outside the hypothesized areas, are referenced in Table 1.

Table 1: Significant correlations between areas of meaning and subcategories on the God concept rating form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PMP Subcategory</th>
<th>God Concept Rating Form Subcategory</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation Coefficient</th>
<th>Bonferroni Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Agnosticism</td>
<td>-0.815</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relation</td>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing</td>
<td>0.730</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonjudgmental</td>
<td>0.651</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God has a plan</td>
<td>0.675</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive-conditional</td>
<td>0.663</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horizontal-innerworldy</td>
<td>0.493</td>
<td>0.032</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Immanence</td>
<td>0.685</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelism</td>
<td>0.894</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusions

Older people’s views of God appear to be associated, at least in some areas, with different ways of experiencing personal meaning. Participants who had stronger agreement with or salience of items referring to God’s judgment experienced less self-acceptance, denoted by statements such as “I am at peace with myself” and “I accept my limitations.” Experiencing God as judgmental may incline people to be more self-critical, or concerned with “right” or “wrong” behavior. It appears that viewing God as judgmental could have a negative impact on one’s self-view. Therefore, it may behoove older people to focus on characteristics of God apart from God’s judgment.

Greater salience of statements related to God’s expectations or desires for human behavior, such as caring for the world or caring for other people, was associated with greater self-transcendence, as it relates to making the world a better place or dedicating one’s life to a cause. Intuitively, it seems that a belief that God desires some outcome would be an additional motivation for doing good deeds. However, believing that God desires a certain outcome is not an assurance that the outcome is pursued by those holding the belief.

People who adhere to traditional Christian contents may place more stock in religion, and thus experience personal meaning more strongly through religion than people who do not adhere to traditional contents. It also possible that items on the PMP related to religion are inclined toward traditional beliefs. People’s experiences of God in relational terms were associated only weakly with greater self-acceptance; perhaps greater levels of self-acceptance are related to some relational aspects, such as God being loving and caring, but not to others (e.g. God as parent or father).

Table 1 indicates several other interesting associations. Experiencing God in judgmental terms is negatively associated with the meaning categories of relationship and self-transcendence. Perhaps older people who experience God as judgmental are more cautious in relationships and in out-reaching activities; or, perhaps, people who are more limited relationally or those who do not reach out gravitate towards such a conception.

Because meaning can be experienced in multiple areas, and because one belief about God is not associated with all meaning areas, it appears that a negative or positive association with one God concept does not imply that one will not experience high levels of personal meaning in other areas.

Convenience sampling and the common background of the participants make these results community-specific. Certain theological beliefs were pronounced in this group; a different denominational group or group with a different educational level might produce a completely different list of God concepts. Also, because this study relies on correlational comparisons, it is not possible to claim whether certain conceptions of God cause certain experiences of personal meaning, or vice versa.

Less than desirable methodologically is the current study’s reliance on subjective determinations for dividing responses to “What is God like?” into individual statements, as well as narrowing the God concept list and dividing the statements into sub-categories of beliefs about God. In some cases, people’s ratings on one item in a category appear to consistently contradict their ratings on other items in the category. Future studies should rely on inter-rater
agreement and a strict coding scheme before final categorizations are made. Also, it should be noted that responding in writing to the question “What is God like?” does not necessarily completely capture an individual’s view of God.

Future research could also benefit from being experimental in nature. For example, one could investigate whether focusing on certain aspects of God, such as God being judgmental, in a writing exercise affects scores on the PMP. Future research could also focus on people’s emotional reactions to God conceptions (God image), versus their cognitive beliefs about God; these two measures could have very different results in terms of their associations to the experience of personal meaning.

Despite some questions related to methodology, the current study provides some evidence that particular conceptions of God are positively and negatively associated with aspects of personal meaning. This suggests that fostering certain aspects of God, and pruning others, may be beneficial and adaptive in older age.

5. Acknowledgments

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6. References


