Made in His Image: How Christian God Image Influences Interpersonal Judgments of Severe Mental Illness

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MADE IN HIS IMAGE: HOW CHRISTIAN GOD IMAGE INFLUENCES INTERPERSONAL JUDGMENTS OF SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS

by
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ABSTRACT

MADE IN HIS IMAGE: HOW CHRISTIAN GOD IMAGE INFLUENCES INTERPERSONAL JUDGMENTS OF SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS

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After a review of the relevant literature on God image and interpersonal judgment theories and research, a priming study was used to analyze the relationship between God image and judgment of people with severe mental illness. Participants made judgments of a video presentation of a man with schizophrenia either before or after being given a questionnaire about their God image. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) analysis showed no statistically significant differences between those who were primed to reflect on their God image before making the judgment and those who were not, although the small effect size (d = -0.30) indicated slightly more severe judgments of the man by those who were primed. A regression analysis showed that more positive God image predicted less severe judgments, although statistical power was an issue for both analyses. Implications and potential future research are discussed.
I would like to thank first and foremost God for helping me to get this far and truly intervening on my behalf to make this project possible. I would also like to thank my parents, Chris and Stacy Davis, for teaching me to pursue excellence as its own reward. Many thanks are also due to my thesis advisor, Dr. Tim Smith, for his tireless guidance; Dr. Lynn Eyestone for inspiring me to study this subject in depth; and Dr. Bruce Brown for acting as the liaison between the psychology department and Honors program.
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Human relationships are complicated by a variety of factors. Abounding differences lead to stigmatization, discrimination, fear, social distancing, and in/out-grouping. One of the most prominent examples of these behaviors is the treatment of people with severe mental illness (PSMI). The issue of mental illness stigmatization needs no introduction, as it has been widely discussed in scientific literature, policy discussions, and pop psychology (e.g., Feldman, 2018), but judgment-related behaviors are not limited to stigmatization alone. Investigating the antecedents for these behaviors is an important part of correcting unfair treatment and lack of care for PSMI. Beyond stigmatization, wider investigation of the factors that influence interpersonal judgments towards PSMI is necessary.

Research shows that stigmatizing judgments about mental illness made by community members have both structural and personal consequences for PSMI (Rüsch et al., 2020). Outside of therapy and pharmaceutical interventions, PSMI can be helped by encouraging the modification of harmful narratives about mental illness that may exist in communities. These efforts extend the responsibility to assist the suffering from psychologists and counselors to political leaders, cultural icons, teachers, and the clergy. All can have a meaningful impact on the attitudes that others form about PSMI.

One pathway by which social judgments are fostered and modified is religious belief (Wesselmann & Graziano, 2005). Beliefs about the Divine, morality, the nature of humankind, and other such subjects may significantly influence the worldview of each person, regardless of their avowed religious affiliation. The psychology of religion has made great strides in recent years to more deeply understand how religion and spirituality
influence behavior and cognition. However, much psychology of religion research suffers from overly simplistic measurement of religiosity, using arbitrary constructs such as church attendance to measure global religiosity, thus failing to capture the psychological impacts of specific religious beliefs and practices (Slife & Reber, 2009). As Slife and Reber put it: “This approach is like trying to understand a woman’s relationship with her partner by counting the number of times she goes home after work” (p. 73). Given that religion and spirituality can so significantly affect interactions with others, a significant research opportunity exists in examining the relationship between interpersonal judgments and narrower constructs of religious and spiritual beliefs.

One particularly interesting construct that has grown out of the psychology of religion is God image. God image differs from God concept as abstraction differs from experience. Rizzuto (1970) defined God concept as a definitional expression of God’s character and nature, while God image is the individual’s personal imagination of how God is as they interact with Him.\(^1\) Past research has suggested that God image can influence the quality of some relationships with other people (Chartier & Goener, 1976). Given this background, and that many people in the United States view God as a paternal figure who can be used as a model of “best case scenario” treatment, it is reasonable to ascertain that the view that they hold of their relationship with God could have a significant impact on the way they view and treat others. As such, this study will examine the following research questions:

1. Does eliciting research participants to reflect on their God image predict less severe judgments of PSMI?
2. Is God image related to judgments of PSMI? If so, to what degree?
These questions will be examined through a literature review and hypothesis testing.

**Literature Review**

**God Image**

Integrating religious constructs into psychological science is an important endeavor. Frequently, underlying philosophical biases in psychological science have prevented the forthright investigation of how religion and spirituality influence behavior and cognition (Slife & Reber, 2009). Psychologists risk imposing their own biases, which tend toward naturalism and agnosticism, on the interpretation of phenomena experienced by religious and spiritual persons. While agnosticism as a research approach has a key role in ensuring research integrity, agnosticism as a worldview increases the risk of underemphasizing the nature and influence of religious and spiritual factors in the cognition, behavior, and experience of religious and spiritual practitioners. To avoid this confoundment, operationalization of religious concepts and practice must take an affirming approach to the beliefs that religious and spiritual people hold dear, treating them as real phenomena that can have significant impact on their lives, independent of standard naturalistic and cognitive-behavioral explanations. God image is one of these affirming constructs.

God image is different from God concept. Rizzuto (1970) originally made this distinction, emphasizing that God concept is an abstract, definitional expression of God’s character and nature, while God image refers to the individual’s individual imagination of how God is on a personal level. This image comes through learned beliefs about, and personal interaction and experience with, the Divine. God image is a strong construct of beliefs about God because it emphasizes the relational nature of Divine relationships,
which more accurately reflects the way that people believe about God in practice. It also
gives credence to the believer’s experience, moving God’s influence out of the realm of
mere crystallized knowledge and into one of actual intervention, power, and influence.

Although God image is characterized on a continuous spectrum, it is often helpful
to think of it in a binary manner. Positive God image conceives of God as a merciful,
compassionate, and loving Being, whereas negative God image sees God as punitive,
unforgiving, and distant. Based on scales used to measure God image, it can be
reasonably ascertained that positive God image is often marked by feelings of
confidence, self-worth, love, and being cared for. On the other hand, negative God image
is defined more by feelings of inadequacy, abasement, hopelessness, and detachment in
relation to God (Lawrence, 1997; Bradshaw et al., 2010).

A person’s God image is formed through a multifactorial process. Because
religious belief is socially constructed, one’s God image is strongly influenced by the
spiritual support that they receive from others, especially private, informal sharing of
spiritual experiences and conversion (Krause & Ironson, 2019). This is true despite God
image focusing on one’s personal understanding, experience, and imagination of the
Divine. As a child’s relationship with a grandparent is often mediated, at least at first, by
the guidance of a parent, so too is a person’s relationship with God often struck up
through another person. This relationship mediation could feasibly serve either to bolster
positive God image or increase negative God image, depending on the quality and
quantity of spiritual support received.

Social influences on God image are further borne out by research on its
relationship with attachment theory. Anxious attachment to God has moderate association
with distant God image, as well as secure attachment to loving God image (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Attachment to others (including God), although variable from relationship to relationship, is often based on the experience that a child has with their primary caregivers (Moriarty et al., 2006). Attachment can have both conscious and subconscious levels, such that individuals with insecure attachment to their primary caregivers on a subconscious level may consciously attempt to establish secure attachment with God by visualizing Him as a perfect parent (Halcrow et al., 2004; Hall & Porter, 2004; Hill & Hall, 2002, cited in Moriarty et al., 2006). Given that much religiously motivated behavior toward others is based on a concept of God’s character, it is feasible that these changes in God image could also influence the attachment behavior that a believer manifests toward other people. While they may still feel apprehensive or unmotivated to seek close attachment for its own sake, they may be willing to let others be close to them to fulfill the commandment of God to love and serve the Other, common to practically all world religions.

**God Image in Previous Research and Theory**

God image has a considerable influence on a variety of psychological outcomes. Benevolent God image has been found to increase life satisfaction through the mechanism of increased hope (Krause & Ironson, 2019) and physical health via increased gratitude (Krause et al., 2015). Additionally, the effect of feeling forgiven by God had differing effects on death anxiety depending on individuals’ God images, with theistic (involved and active) God images having the greatest positive effect (Krause & Hill, 2020). These relationships illustrate that God image may serve as an underlying stimulus or mediator for meaningful psychological change, rather than a direct influence. This
does not preclude the possibility that God image can have a direct effect on certain outcomes. Rather, it shows the need to consider the influence of God image on variables that have already been shown to have a direct relationship with a particular outcome, as the direct relationship itself may not tell the entire story.

These findings are of further interest to the present study because of the link between positive affect (happiness) and increased stereotyping of others in mock-juror tasks (Curtis, 2013). Life satisfaction, physical health, and gratitude may be associated with positive affect, begging the question of whether more positive God image may in fact increase negative judgments of others. Such doubts necessitate the present study.

Additionally, it should be noted that being given the opportunity to judge PSMI, which may go against a person’s affirmed moral standards and cause cognitive dissonance, could increase their compensatory appraisal of positive God image. While no research has directly shown this effect, it has been shown that cognitive dissonance is related to increased endorsement of belief in God (Randles et al., 2015). In other words, if positive God image is associated with increased judgment, it may be a function of judgment acting upon God image rather than the reverse.

God image can also influence the way that people approach more benign, short-term social interactions. Meijer-van Abbema and Koole (2017) cite one example of this, in which priming of benevolent and angry God images increase helping behavior and aggression, respectively. In their own experiment, they found that those with positive God images who prayed as part of the experimental manipulation made less-hostile judgments of the emotions of human eyes, although they did not increase their positive judgments. Morewedge and Clear (2008) found that concepts of a humanlike God (which
may be considered a type of God image itself) increase moral judgments based on
religious norms – that is, what one believes to be wrong for a person of their religion is
considered morally wrong for everyone. This research suggests that there is a connection
between people’s God image and the ways that they judge the behavior and character of
others.

Such a connection has been suggested by notable thinkers outside of psychology
as well. The philosopher Martin Buber (1958) famously presented the relational postures
that people take toward God and other people as being highly intertwined. He argued that
a truly meaningful life (what psychologists might measure using Seligman’s (2012)
PERMA framework) could only be found in true relation with the Other — both of the
Divine and human varieties. The obstacle to this end, he claimed, is that rather than
taking an I-Thou posture toward the Other, people frequently look upon them with an I-It
perspective. The I-It perspective is marked by making others subject to our experience
rather than seeing them, and ourselves, as part of one great relational whole. I-Thou
attitudes are summarized by Buber as follows: “The relation to the Thou is direct. No
system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou. The
memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole.
No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between I and Thou” (p. 26). Although
Buber’s theory is difficult to research empirically, his ideas are foundational to
understanding the relationship between God image and judgment. In a sense, what this
study is really trying to understand is whether stronger positive God image engenders
more meaningful I-Thou perspectives toward other human beings. This is measured
through the mediator of affirmed judgments.
Some may take issue with the influence of a non-psychological theory on this research. Such skepticism is unfounded. Many psychological constructs are based on philosophy and folk knowledge. Notable examples include grit (Duckworth & Gross, 2014) and the very concept of happiness. An entire sub-discipline has been formed around the latter in the form of positive psychology. Psychology benefits from integrating every aspect of the human experience, as evidenced by psychology of religion. Philosophical discourse is no exception.

**Types of Judgment**

To fully understand the questions under investigation in the present study, the concept of judgment must be adequately defined and explored. In psychological science, judgment is not an explicitly negative term, as it often is in popular usage. The American Psychological Association defines judgment as “the capacity to recognize relationships, draw conclusions from evidence, and make critical evaluations of events and people” (“Judgment,” n.d.). Ultimately, judgment is simply discernment, although the apparently reasonable conclusions that can be drawn range widely from person to person due to differing perspectives and ways of thinking. Within the general construct of judgment exist many sub-constructs. Each type of judgment has a unique social and evolutionary purpose. With regards to PSMI, judgment can be divided into four categories: stigmatization, blame judgments, judgments of safety, and social partner suitability judgments. These constructs are related but differ in their purposes and consequences.

**Stigmatization**

Stigmatization is a blanket judgment cast upon people belonging to an out-group, often used to create social distance from an in-group. Historically, PSMI have been a
stigmatized group. Stigmatization requires that the out-group member be identified as different and “worthy” of stigmatization (Riehele & Lincoln, 2018). In cases of PSMI, this requires that the individual have a diagnosis known to their potential judge. Judgments that result from mere observation of atypical behavior are not properly considered stigmatization.

Stigmatization may have an evolutionary role. Boysen (2018) postulated that stigmatization has historically helped people avoid communicable diseases and poor social partners. However, many stigmatizing attitudes, such as negative attitudes toward the mentally ill and racial out-groups, do little to avoid disease and other threats, and must be attributed to some other cause.

The educational and socioeconomic inequities that exist between some in- and out-groups may be an explanation for modern stigmatization. Spending a large amount of time interacting with poorer and less-educated people could negatively affect the educational and economic positioning and accomplishment of in-group members, as many of these outcomes are a function of one’s social network. In a similar way, the perception that interaction with PSMI may have negative social consequences could contribute to the widespread stigmatization inflicted upon them.

Although stigmatization is dependent on a label to exist, the severity of stigmatizing judgments after their initial endorsement varies with the consideration of additional factors. Research has shown that the anticipated consequences of PSMI’s conditions can strongly influence judgments about them. For example: although people with mental illness are generally rated as less suitable romantic partners, a person with an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) that has the consequences of extreme frugality and
dedication to their employment, in turn leading to financial success, is more favorably rated than other people with OCD as a potential long-term partner. In a related, but opposite, vein, people with bipolar disorder who have displayed promiscuous behavior during their manic episodes are rated more poorly for both short- and long-term relationships than those whose mania does not include promiscuity (Boysen, 2018). These consequences do not have to be directly observed to heighten stigmatizing attitudes; the judge need only believe that they are likely. This is shown in findings that desire for social distance from people with schizophrenia is significantly correlated with the belief (not experience) that they have a tendency toward violence (Van Dorn et al., 2005). Thus, while stigmatization is a group-level judgment initially, its impact can vary for different PSMI.

The fact that consequences can have such a large impact on the level of stigmatization may, in part, explain why research measuring stigmatizing attitudes toward people with schizophrenia found no significant difference between the levels of stigma held between people with schizophrenia and other stakeholder groups (Van Dorn et al., 2005). In other words, even those who experience schizophrenia held stigmatizing attitudes toward other people with the condition. This could be due to their intimate experience with the consequences of the illness. This finding discourages the theory that the type of relationship a person has with PSMI, even belonging to the group, significantly affects their attitudes towards them. It must be something else.

**Relationship to the Present Study.** Research about stigmatization and its differing personal impact is helpful in taking a nuanced approach to the research questions at hand. If stigmatizing judgments are influenced by the anticipated
consequences of the condition of the person under consideration, then for God image to have a significant effect on judgments of PSMI (at least of the stigmatizing variety), it likely must influence the judge’s perception and appraisal of the behavioral tendencies they attribute to the person. This could be accomplished by having a sense that God loves and heals at a personal level, mitigating the negative consequences of anticipated negative behavior by PSMI. Alternatively, holding a God image that emphasizes the patience of God with oneself despite negative character traits and personal challenges could feasibly encourage the extension of such grace to other people. In any case, the research on stigmatization cited indicates that any effect that God image has on judgments of PSMI is unlikely to be due to assigning a new social status to the judged.

**Blame Judgments**

Blame judgments form another important sub-construct of judgment. Blame judgments are graded, socially consequential judgments that can be applied to both intentional and unintentional behavior (Malle, 2021). Where stigmatization focuses more on *status*, blame judgments judge *behavior* and *choices*. This type of judgment is especially important in investigating judgments toward PSMI, since judges must determine to what degree the mentally ill person is responsible and justified for their behavior. People who consider mental illness to be less legitimate may assign more blame to PSMI for erratic behavior.

Malle et al. (2014) described the precipitation of blame judgments as taking place through the following sequence:

a. occurrence of the event
b. determination of agent causality of the event,
c. determination of agent intentionality in the event,
d. if intentional, consideration of the reasons for the agent’s action,
e. if unintentional, determination of the obligation and capacity of the agent to prevent the event,
f. final judgment of a particular degree of blameworthiness.

As can be seen, blame judgments are a complicated process involving diverse cognitive mechanisms. This complexity is warranted because blame judgments must be made with caution — the social consequences of the judgment affect the social standing of both the judge and the judged. Inappropriate blame judgments by the judge can damage their reputation as a trustworthy individual. Generally agreed-with negative blame judgments can contribute to a holistic perception of unscrupulousness about the judged. Due to these far-reaching consequences, it is vital that the formation of blame judgments be considered when discussing judgment of PSMI in general.

In- and outgroup status can influence blame judgments. Monroe and Malle (2018) found that, consistent with the highly consequential nature of blame judgments, people tend to update their appraisals upon becoming aware of new information. This trend persists even amid high cognitive load. Nevertheless, in some cases blame mitigation is lower, as in updated judgments of outgroup targets involved in unpreventable accidents or with understandable reasons for normally blameworthy actions; people continue to be suspicious of outgroup members even when presented with compelling evidence that goes against their stereotypes. However, this does not mean that judgment updating is more aggressive toward outgroups. PSMI may be treated as an outgroup by people who do not experience mental illness and thus are less likely to enjoy the benefit of the doubt in some situations where it is generally warranted.

Safety and Social Partner Suitability Judgments
Judgments of safety and social partner suitability overlap significantly. These constructs have not been so explicitly defined in the literature as stigmatization and blame judgments have. In large part, they describe constructs that have not been studied at all. I define safety judgment as a judgment based on an appraisal of the level of safety and comfort that one feels in an interpersonal interaction, whether physical or emotional. Social partner suitability judgments go a step beyond this to include a judgment of the pleasantness of a social interaction. Where there is not a positive judgment of safety, it is unlikely that a social partner will be favorably appraised. These types of judgments are heavily based in emotion. These emotions may result from personal beliefs and experience but are less clearly connected to appraisals of status and behavior than are stigmatization and blame judgments. Further research may reveal stronger links with other types of judgment than are presently known.

Past research has shown that people with schizophrenia tend to be judged as less desirable for follow-up interactions, even when their condition is not revealed in conversation (Riehle & Lincoln, 2018). As previously noted, desire for social distance from people with schizophrenia is significantly correlated with beliefs in their inclination to violent behavior (Van Dorn et al., 2005). It may be that interactions with people with schizophrenia elicit in their social partners a sense that they are prone to violent behavior. Social partners may not be fully conscious of this feeling. Furthermore, contact (whether real or imagined) with people with schizophrenia does not seem to reduce this desire for social distance (Kaminetzky, 2017; Omori et al., 2012). In short, PSMI, particularly people with schizophrenia contend with being judged as unsafe and unpleasant social
partners, despite increased contact with an individual. This implies that some other factor, within the judging agent, must change for these judgments to be softened.

**Hypotheses**

It is obvious that not all people judge PSMI in the same way. However, no meaningful predictor of these differences has been found. The purpose of this study is to investigate one possible predictor of these differences: the God image of the judges. This is a research area that has been scarcely explored, but the literature points to a possible connection between God image and judgment, likely through the influence of some mediating variable. This study focuses on the connection between God image and judgment; mediation analyses must be left for future research.

I present two hypotheses for the present study. First, I predict that participants who are primed to reflect on their God image before making judgments about someone with severe mental illness will display less harsh judgments toward an individual PSMI. Second, I predict that measured God image will have a negative relationship with severity of judgments about a PSMI.

**Methods**

**Participants and Recruitment**

Participants (N = 112) were recruited via posts on the researcher’s Facebook and Instagram (in various groups), distributing flyers on a college campus, and word of mouth. Any self-identified Christian adult that resided in the United States, could read English, and give informed consent was eligible to participate. An attempt was made to recruit participants from the r/samplesize sub-reddit as well, but those efforts were
abandoned after much of the data was found to be falsely generated by bots. Participants each received a five-dollar Amazon gift card for their participation.

Two participants were excluded from the final analyses due to issues in data collection that led to them taking the survey twice, risking assignment to both groups. These issues were made known to the researcher through the participants’ own admission. One other participant was excluded from group difference testing due to a data error that made it impossible to know which group they had been assigned.

The sample was largely White (90.8%) and female (66.1%). Most participants had at least some post-secondary education (95.4%). Average age was 29.7 years ($SD = 11.7$). 22 of the participants had had previous contact with an individual with schizophrenia (20.2%). The entire sample self-identified as Christian. After computer randomization and data cleaning, 56 participants belonged to the control group and 52 participants were included in the experimental group.

**Measures**

*God Image Inventory*

To measure God image, the God Image Inventory (GII) was used (Lawrence, 1997). Lawrence’s original measure was a six-scale, 72 item questionnaire. To reduce potential participant attrition and measure the most relevant measures of God image with greater precision, the present study utilized only three scales with a total of 35 items. Higher scores on the GII were interpreted as more positive God image.

The scales that were used were the acceptance, benevolence, and presence scales. The excluded scales were challenge, influence, and providence. The excluded scales did not appear to have an obvious role in the type of relationship with God that could feasibly
influence judgments of others. For example, the challenge scale measures how much participants believe that God is involved in and cares about their growth. While such challenge could be helpful in assisting PSMI, this study focused more on people choosing to be compassionate instead of judgmental. Challenging behaviors could grow out of either compassion or judgmental attitudes, confounding the relationship under investigation. Influence and providence, which focused on God’s personal involvement in one’s life, were considered irrelevant to the hypothesized relationship and thus likely to complicate and confound the experiment. The questionnaire used in the study can be found in Appendix A.

The GII was validated only for Christian populations. Accordingly, all participants in the present study were Christian. Although the lack of data about non-Christians is regrettable, it was deemed more important to have data with a strong basis of validation. Internal consistency was strong for the present sample (GII Composite: $\alpha = .95$; GII Benevolence: $\alpha = .89$; GII Acceptance: $\alpha = .83$; GII Presence: $\alpha = .95$).

**Judgments of Severe Mental Illness Scale**

The Judgments of Severe Mental Illness (JSMI) scale was developed especially for the present study. The measure asks participants to rate a PSMI diagnosed with schizophrenia as presented to them in a video on 15 items, using a six-point Likert scale. Lower scores on the measure were interpreted as more severe judgments toward the PSMI.

The JSMI was developed to have strong face and concurrent validity with the GII scales selected for the study. Thus, the measure has three sub-scales, each corresponding to one sub-scale of the GII and based on an underlying question that must be answered
when making a judgment of PSMI: acceptance (How deserving is this person of love, despite strange, disruptive, or difficult behavior associated with their condition?), benevolence (How do I act towards this person?), and presence (How close do I think this person could be to me?). The complete text of the instrument can be found in Appendix B.

This method of measurement development was chosen due to the lack of opportunity to subject the measure to rigorous validation and peer review. Growing a measure of judgment out of the GII avoids the issues of studying two purportedly related variables with measures that cannot feasibly be related. Assuming that the items chosen for the JSMI truly capture the construct of judgments toward PSMI, the close relationship between the building blocks of the GII and JSMI, should ensure that any lack of relationship between the two is due to true differences rather than measurement error. Of course, the possibility exists that the scale is simply not valid. However, the face validity appeared to be appropriate, with adequate rationale behind the items chosen (that is, they are associated with behaviors indicative of judgment). Internal consistency was acceptable (JSMI Total: $\alpha = .87$; JSMI Acceptance: $\alpha = .75$; JSMI Benevolence: $\alpha = .77$; JSMI Presence: $\alpha = .74$). A factor analysis equivalent (principal components analysis) revealed one major factor loading (see Figure 1). Therefore, the JSMI was treated as a univariate measure in all analyses.

*Experience with Schizophrenia Measure*

Past research has suggested that contact with people with schizophrenia does little to improve individual assessment of them. Like any scientific finding, this should be subjected to continual testing. Therefore, to account for the influence that experience with
people with schizophrenia might have on the judgments of the participants (for good or ill), a two-item survey was used: (a) Have you had personal experience with someone diagnosed with schizophrenia? and (b) On a scale of 1-10, rate how positive your experience was with this person. These data were intended for use as a control in regression analyses.

**Procedure**

The study was administered online via the Qualtrics platform. Participants were randomly assigned by a computer to one of two conditions: experimental or control. After giving informed consent and demographic data, all participants were first administered the Experience with Schizophrenia Measure. Then, the experimental group completed the GII as a priming agent. The control group passed directly to viewing a YouTube video of an individual displaying symptoms of schizophrenia.

To view the video, participants clicked on a link that took them out of the survey. After filling out the GII, the experimental group viewed the same video. After viewing the video, all participants wrote their own answers when asked to list some characteristics of the person in the video. These responses were recorded in the survey and served to force the participants to make judgments of the person they had just observed. Finally, all participants responded to the JSMI scale. Following the JSMI, the control group completed the GII. Participants were thanked and invited to open a second survey to provide the researcher an email at which to receive their compensation.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to analyze the data for Hypothesis 1. The dependent variable was the score on the JSMI, with the group condition as the
independent variable. Covariates were gender, education level, and whether the participant had interacted with a person with schizophrenia before. Hypothesis 2 was tested using a regression analysis, with the JSMI as the outcome variable and the GII and subscales as the independent variables. The variables of education, prior experience with schizophrenia, and gender were added in the first step, before other variables.

**Results**

**Hypothesis 1**

ANCOVA analysis failed to find significant differences between groups, $F(1, 106) = 2.73, p = .10$ ($M_{Control} = 60.32, SD = 10.77, M_{Experimental} = 63.25, SD = 8.86$). Conversion of means and standard deviations to Cohen’s $d$ found a small effect size for the intervention, $d = -0.30$.

Unpaired $t$-tests were also performed to check for differences on the GII between groups. No significant differences were found for the GII-Composite ($t(106) = 1.16, p = .25$), GII-Benevolence ($t(106) = 1.62, p = .11$), GII-Acceptance ($t(106) = 1.14, p = .26$), or GII-Presence ($t(106) = 0.59, p = .56$).

**Hypothesis 2**

Multiple linear regression was used to test if the Acceptance, Benevolence, and Presence sub-scales of the GII, respectively, significantly predicted JSMI-Composite scores. Age, gender, level of education, and whether a participant had experience with someone with schizophrenia were included in the model as controls. Race was excluded due to low sample diversity. After an initial running of the analysis, experience with someone with schizophrenia was also removed, as it did little to influence the model ($\beta =$}
-0.002, \( p = .99 \) and reduced statistical power. The resulting overall regression model was statistically significant \( (R^2 = 0.06, F(5, 103) = 2.31, p = .05) \). GII-Acceptance did not significantly predict JSMI Composite scores \( (\beta = 0.17, p = .22) \). Neither did GII-Benevolence \( (\beta = 0.09, p = .57) \) or GII-Presence \( (\beta = 0.04, p = .79) \).

Due to the small sample size, small effect size, and associated reduction of statistical power with multiple predictors in the model, a second, simple, linear regression was used to test if the GII-Composite significantly predicted JSMI-Composite scores. No controls were used. The overall regression model was statistically significant \( (R^2 = 0.06, F(1, 107) = 7.57, p = .007) \). It was also found that the GII-Composite significantly predicted JSMI-Composite scores \( (\beta = 0.26, p = .007) \). This value corresponds with a moderate correlation between the two variables.

**Discussion**

The present study tested two principal hypotheses: (a) priming potential judges of a person with schizophrenia to reflect on their God image would reduce the severity of their judgments and (b) God image scores would have a negative relationship with the severity of judgments toward a person with schizophrenia.

Hypothesis 1 was not supported by the data, as group differences did not reach statistical significance. This was due to the small effect size of the intervention, which reduced statistical power.

Although Hypothesis 1 was not statistically significant in an ANCOVA, it did have an effect size worthy of mention. By convention, the effect size measured is considered small. Small effect sizes require large samples to reach statistical significance. The sample in the present study was only a bit larger than the 40 participants per group
suggested for analyses with a large predicted effect size ($d > 0.8$). Given this information, it is likely that the effect of the experimental intervention would reach statistical significance if performed with a larger sample.

Although the effect size measured is of interest, it should not be construed as a confirmation of the hypothesis because the directionality of the effect is opposite of what was predicted. In other words, participants that were primed to reflect on their God image made more severe judgments of the person with schizophrenia presented to them.

The regression model of Hypothesis 2 was statistically significant, although the individual sub-scales of the GII were not significant predictors. In other words, the combination of variables was sufficient to explain the variance of the regression, but no one variable could do so significantly in the presence of the others. A follow-up analysis that removed controls (which had been non-significant predictors as well) and used the GII-Composite instead of individual sub-scales showed a significant positive relationship with the JSMI. Given that severity of judgment was construed as inversely related with scores on the JSMI, the predicted negative relationship between God image and judgment was supported.

The results of the regression analysis of Hypothesis 2 could lead to the conclusion that the findings of Hypothesis 1 may have had more to do with the individual God images of those in the experimental group than the priming itself. However, no significant differences on GII scores were found between groups. Thus, it is more likely that the findings were influenced by either the way participants reflected on their God image or the measurement moment of the judgment-making. A separate regression analysis that includes the group condition in the model could shed greater light on this
question. However, a larger sample would be required as additional variables are added to the regression, especially when the effect size is small.

Without further analysis, several factors that could give rise to the qualitative differences between the groups are still worthy of discussion. The syntax of the God image measure may contribute to these outcomes. Although the GII asks some questions about God’s loving/punitive behavior towards others, the vast majority focus on the relationship between God and the respondent; only six of the 35 items used in the present study focus explicitly on God’s relationship with other people, and some use potentially stigmatizing language, such as “I think God even loves atheists.” Thus, the measure may prime respondents to think more about themselves and less of others, even while thinking about their relationship with God.

If it exists, this effect would presumably be similar for both groups, whose study protocol differed only in the measurement moment of God image. The fact that the control group received the GII after they had already made their judgments made it impossible to capture such an effect. Had all participants responded to the GII before making their judgments, the results of the regression analysis may well have been different than they were.

Alternatively, the results may indicate that causal direction was opposite of that postulated in Hypothesis 2 – that is, the elicitation of judgment towards the person with schizophrenia influenced subsequent God image. It is possible that the discomforting act of making judgments about a person with schizophrenia could foment a desire for opposite compensating emotions. This desire might have encouraged control group participants to endorse a more positive God image, leading to the group differences
present in the ANCOVA test. Such a result would be consistent with the research of Randles et al. (2015), who found that cognitive dissonance increased endorsement of test items related to belief in God. This is also consistent with research that suggests unconscious insecure attachment to others could encourage conscious efforts to have secure attachment to God (Halcrow et al., 2004; Hall & Porter, 2004; Hill & Hall, 2002, cited in Moriarty et al., 2006). Although attachment to a man in a video vignette is surely more limited than attachment in relationships in vivo, attachment can influence any type of human interaction and thus may have affected the outcome of the present study. This explanation also fits well with the literature that states that God image can be influenced by spiritual support (or the lack thereof) (Krause & Ironson, 2019). Interactions that elicit uncomfortable judgment may act as a sort of spiritual stimulus to think of God in a more positive light as a type of self-support. However, this interpretation takes some liberties with the definition of spiritual support used by past researchers.

Past research suggests other reasons why measuring God image prior to inviting judgment may be associated with more negative judgments. Positive God image is associated with better physical health, increased gratitude, greater life satisfaction, and reduced death anxiety (Krause & Ironson, 2019; Krause et al., 2015; Krause & Hill, 2020). Presumably, people that enjoy these outcomes would have greater positive affect, which has been shown to be associated with stereotyping judgments in certain situations (Curtis, 2013). Additionally, reflection on God image as a psychological construct could also prompt respondents to literally imagine God, including, for some believers, with a corporal and humanlike form. Morewedge and Clear (2008) found a connection between this type of God image and imposing of strict personal moral norms on others. Such a
mechanism could cause participants to judge the erratic behavior shown in the video used in the present study (including public indecent exposure, dangerous behavior around automobiles, and blasphemous comments) as especially unacceptable. Taking all this research together, it may not be surprising that the effect in Hypothesis 1 goes in the direction that it does.

Another past finding that is reinforced in the present study is that experience with a person with schizophrenia does little to reduce negative judgments of other people with schizophrenia (Kaminetzky, 2017; Omori et al., 2012). The control for previous experience with schizophrenia was removed from the regression analysis because it had so little effect on the analysis as to be obstructive to detecting precise results. However, it should be noted that only 22 of the participants reported experience with a person with schizophrenia. Therefore, this finding may not be from a sufficiently large sample to be considered conclusive.

The small sample and effect sizes of the present study pose an important limitation to the research. As mentioned before, quantitative research with small sample and effect sizes has limited statistical power. Future replication work with larger samples would be of great benefit to strengthening the findings of this study. Larger samples would also allow for more generalizable results.

The sample was limited in other ways as well. Unforeseen circumstances forced the data set to be drawn from a more limited population than originally intended. Initially, participants were recruited from the r/samplesize sub-reddit on Reddit to gather a sample from the full spectrum of racial, generational, and geographic diversity found in the United States (although it should be noted that the average Reddit user tends to be a
young adult male). Unfortunately, the sample collected from Reddit was found to consist mostly of fabricated data, including data collected from bots that completed the survey with the intention of unfairly obtaining the compensation. To remediate this issue, other rounds of data collection was performed from among the researcher’s personal Facebook friends, acquaintances, Instagram followers, and other personal contacts, whether strangers or familiar. Although some connections shared the study with people outside of the researcher’s personal contacts, this sample is necessarily narrower than a truly random sample. The researcher’s connections, and in turn their connections, are far more likely to belong to the same religious denomination as him, as well as reside in the western United States and come from a similar racial background.

Another limitation to the research is the wording of the free-response question. Participants were asked to write about the characteristics of the person in the video, which may have been too vague to elicit judgment-making in some participants. Future research would do well to word such invitations more carefully.

Research on this topic could also be strengthened by analyzing whether God image influences negative judgments, positive judgments, or both. Previous research has suggested that God image sometimes influences only negative judgments, independent of positive judgments (Meijer-van Abbema and Koole, 2017). The JSMI did not have sufficient negatively worded items to feasibly discriminate the difference between positive and negative judgments. A more comprehensive measure bolstered by peer review and statistical validation could more appropriately approach such questions, as well as increase confidence in the findings of other studies like this one.
This research began with anticipation of the potential implications of the hypotheses being confirmed. Although the hypotheses were not confirmed as expected, several important implications remain. First, the outcome of Hypothesis 2 stands: participants with more positive God image made significantly less severe judgments of the person with schizophrenia. This could mean that fostering more positive God image in Christian believers could help to reduce stigma and other judgments about people with schizophrenia. However, such exercises, whether personal or community-based, should be tempered with some kind of intervention that protects against the negative effect that God image priming or self-centered conceptions of God image may have on judgments of people with schizophrenia, consistent with the results of Hypothesis 1. If it is the case that group differences in God image are due to compensatory reactions after judging PSMI, then one must be careful to avoid using experiences with PSMI as a way to increase attachment to God, lest the mentally ill suffer greater isolation as a result.

Second, the present findings suggest that the construct of God image may benefit from being approached with a more expansive lens. Testing new ways of measuring God image, with special focus on one’s image of God interacting with the Other, could increase the applicability of such measures to research on relationships between personal beliefs about God and interpersonal behavior.

This study is unique in its approach to applying God image to interpersonal behaviors via an experimental format. Future research can add new insights as experimental methods are applied to studying the way that religious and spiritual beliefs influence everyday behavior. Additionally, much work remains to be done in investigating the influence that religious leaders and practitioners can have on community
attitudes toward severe mental illness. Taking care of the mentally ill is too large a task for any one discipline. Future psychological research will benefit as it becomes increasingly interdisciplinary and continues to expand on ideas, like God image, that form the very center of human experience.
**References**


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https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-015-0063-0


NOTES

1. Although differing religious practitioners may feel more comfortable using other pronouns for God, he/him/his pronouns are used throughout this paper to avoid the confusion that could be engendered by using they/them/their pronouns alongside third-person plural pronouns, as well as reflect the dominant view among the American Christian population from which the research sample is taken.
APPENDIX A

God Image Inventory — Modified

Please choose the answer that most closely reflects your agreement with each of the following statements: 1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Agree, 4 – Strongly Agree.

1. I imagine God to be rather formal, almost standoffish
2. I am sometimes anxious about whether God still loves me
3. I am confident of God's love for me
4. God does not answer when I call
5. I know I'm not perfect, but God loves me anyway
6. I have sometimes felt that I have committed the unforgivable sin
7. I think of God as more compassionate than demanding
8. I can feel God deep inside of me
9. God's love for me has no strings attached
10. God doesn't feel very personal to me
11. Even when I do bad things, I know God still loves me
12. I can talk to God on an intimate basis
13. I think God even loves atheists
14. God nurtures me
15. I get no feeling of closeness to God, even in prayer
16. God loves me only when I perform perfectly
17. God loves me regardless
18. I can't imagine anyone God couldn't love
19. God is always there for me
20. God can easily be provoked by disobedience
21. I often worry about whether God can love me
22. God is looking for a chance to get even with me
23. God's mercy is for everyone
24. God's love for me is unconditional
25. I think God only loves certain people
26. Even if my beliefs about God were wrong, God would still love me
27. I am not good enough for God to love
28. God's compassion knows no religious boundaries
29. I sometimes feel cradled in God's arms
30. Running the world is more important to God than caring about people
31. God feels distant to me
32. I rarely feel that God is with me
33. I feel warm inside when I pray
34. I think God must enjoy getting even with us when we deserve it
35. God never reaches out to me
APPENDIX B

Judgments Toward People with Severe Mental Illness Scale

The following questions refer to the person in the video you just watched. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with each statement on the following scale: 1. Completely disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Slightly disagree; 4. Slightly agree; 5. Agree; 6. Completely agree.

1. I could befriend this person
2. I could not spend my time with this person
3. It would be worth it to have a relationship with this person
4. This person deserves others’ love
5. There is nothing that this person can do that would make them unworthy of my help
6. I would visit this person in a mental hospital
7. I would overcome my discomfort at this person's behavior to help him
8. I would tell other people to avoid this person
9. I would step in to prevent this person from suffering the consequences of his behavior
10. This person could maintain a close relationship with me
11. I think that this person still loves his family
12. This person stays close to others so he can get something
13. This person could be trustworthy
14. I think that this person can give people affection
15. This person has friends
Figure 1

Scree Plot of JSMI Principal Components Analysis

Note. This figure shows why the decision was made to treat the JSMI as a univariate measure. Only the first factor stands out among the 15 that were tested. While the second factor could be considered significant, it lays on the border and so the decision was made to treat the measure as a one-factor scale.