

Introduction

Many children are taught about their parent's religions. In most Christian denominations, this is done through Sunday school programs and by the parents' interest in developing their child's view of God. Some researchers have explored what children believe about what God knows (Barrett et al., 2001). Yet, current psychological literature lacks a thorough understanding of how children perceive God's actions. It is thought that young children may anthropomorphize a supernatural being such as God, depending on children's early understanding of biological systems (Barrett et al., 2001). Research also suggests that children are more likely to attribute supernatural behavior to God than to other living things such as humans or bugs (Nyhof & Johnson, 2017). This study also concluded that children tended to attribute more supernatural abilities to God than mental or physical abilities. There have also been trends that suggest that children's attributions towards God may depend on age, however, it is not yet well understood how important this connection may be.

The current study aimed to better understand children's perceptions of what God can do as compared to what a human, their dad, can do. Understanding how children perceive a supernatural being like God may relate to how children petition God to take certain actions through the act of prayer. Overall, learning more about how children perceive God could offer valuable insights to pastors, Sunday school teachers, and parents in informing their children about their religion.

Hypotheses

Kids will attribute more supernatural abilities to God than their dad in all categories

When explaining how God and their dad would perform actions, children will attribute supernatural explanations to how God would perform an action and attribute natural explanations to how their dad would perform an action

Participants

The participants in this study were children recruited from Northwestern's College staff and faculty as well as from area churches. A total of 22 participants between the ages of 4 and 12 years old provided complete data. Each participant was interviewed and asked multiple questions within three categories of action: physical, biological, and psychological. Some of the interviews were conducted face to face and others were conducted through Zoom.

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Can Your Dad Do This?

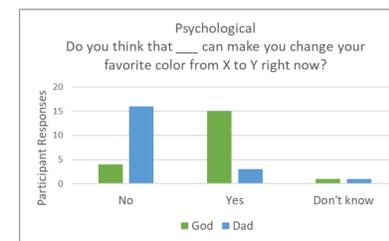
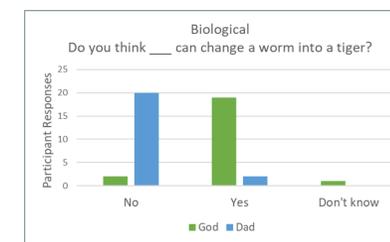
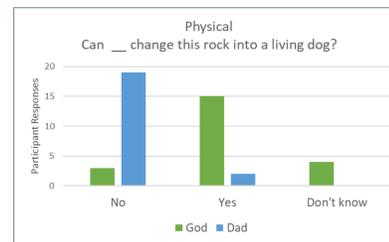
Children's Beliefs About the Biological, Physical, and Psychological Properties of God and Dad

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Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis one addressed whether children identified more supernatural abilities to God than their Dad. The children were asked a series of yes or no question, three about physical actions, three about biological actions, and three about psychological actions. The children answered yes, no, or I don't know in response to these questions.

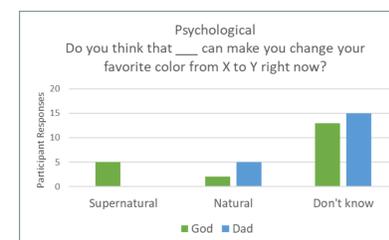
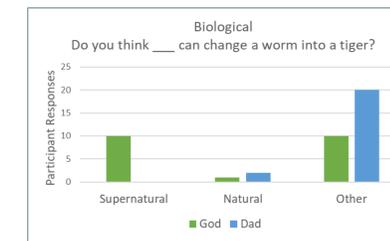
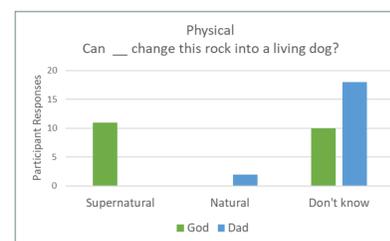
The figures on the right provide one example from each of these categories. The figures show that children were more likely to attribute supernatural abilities to God than their dad in all categories.



Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis two refers to the explanation that the children provided to the yes or no questions. When asked why God or their dad could or could not do an action they were expected to respond with either supernatural or natural explanations/limitations.

The figures demonstrate that the majority of responses were uncategorizable. The responses did not align well with our coding system. However, for the responses that were categorized into either supernatural or natural explanations, supernatural explanations tended to be attributed to God, for the physical and biological categories in particular, and such supernatural explanations were rarely attributed to dad.



Discussion

This study supports the findings of Nyhof and Johnson (2017), which suggests that children attribute more supernatural agents' abilities to God in comparison to other living things such as humans or bugs. Our first hypothesis, predicting that children would attribute more supernatural abilities to God than dad, was supported for 8 of the 9 questions asked. The exception was with a question in the psychological category that asked children if God or their dad could suddenly make them feel happy if they were feeling sad. Children tended to say both God and their dad could make them feel happy. We theorize that this difference may be attributed to tangible experiences of dad making the child happy.

Our second hypothesis, that children would provide supernatural explanations to how God would perform an action and natural explanations to how their dad would perform an action, showed mixed results. A large number of uncategorizable responses mean that making any firm conclusions for this hypothesis is difficult.

We can tentatively conclude that supernatural explanations are somewhat more likely for God's actions than dad's actions. Having an expanded analysis for why God or their dad could and could not perform a task would be beneficial.

While our study generally supports prior work our small sample size and the limitations of our coding scheme suggests a need for more research. Future research should utilize larger sample sizes particularly with more participants in each age group to increase external validity. Along with this a more expansive coding scheme should be utilized to better explain what is happening with the children's answers.

Next steps

In the future, analyzing the qualitative answers to look for patterns in themes (keywords or similar explanations) may lead to a more complete understanding of our results for this study. Expanding the number of participants would be preferable but difficulty with recruitment has limit this endeavor. In the current study, we asked questions regarding children's conceptualization of the different members of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), analyzing these questions may also be a direction for future research.

References

- Barrett, J. L., Richert, R. A., & Driesenga, A. (2001). God's beliefs versus mother's: The development of nonhuman agent concepts. *Child Development*, 72, 50-65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00265>
- Nyhof, M. A., & Johnson, C. N. (2017). Is God just a big person? Children's conceptions of God across cultures and religious traditions. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 60-75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12137>