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# Exemplary Approach to Operationalizing Psychoanalytic Theory and Religion

## Commentary on “The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations Development”

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**P**sychoanalytic theory and religion have posed a notorious difficulty for social scientists: neither of them easily lend themselves to the operationalization of constructs for empirical investigation. Brokaw and Edwards (1994) managed to accomplish both in their recent investigation of psychoanalytic object relations theory as it relates to images of God.

Brokaw and Edwards' study found a consistent, positive correlation of level of object relations development and loving/benevolent images of God. These findings raise some interesting conceptual questions about the interface of object relations development with the nature and maturity of one's relationship with God. For instance, is one's image of God (e.g., loving, wrathful, irrelevant) presumed to be fairly static or dynamic? The very essence of object relations theory seems to suggest that our relationships, even with the Divine object, involves a complex series of passages through stages of symbiotic attachment, autonomy striving, and rapprochement in a lifelong quest to reconcile longings for oneness with separation and individuation (Eowler, 1981; Lovinger, 1984; McDargh, 1983; Saur & Saur, 1992). If this is the case, then how can we best interpret the findings of this study? For instance, one could imagine a person with a fore-closed identity status (Schlossberg, 1985) rating their God image as loving and not wrathful because it is the conventional word-image learned during their childhood religious education. Such a person would likely be operating in Fowler's (1981) stage 3 of faith (synthetic-conventional). This person would

not have embarked on the difficult quest of squaring God's nature as loving creator (or 'gratifying object') with his nature as judge (or 'withholding object'). As a result, this person may be prone to 'idealize' God as a solely gratifying object, as a defense against feelings of disappointment and rage at the God who allows suffering and/or who punishes the unjust. An example of this is seen in a woman who was informed that she had terminal cancer, but who refused to take medications through the day she died because she claimed with unswerving faith that God was going to heal her with a miracle. If asked to describe her God image, this woman most likely would have responded with 'loving/benevolence.' However, what she meant by 'loving' would probably differ significantly from the person with more mature object relations who is able to assimilate more fully the sometimes destructive God of the Old Testament (e.g., destroying the world with a flood as punishment for sin, Genesis 6:5-14; decreeing that a man should be stoned to death for gathering wood on the Sabbath, Numbers 15:32-36) with the self-sacrificial lovingkindness of the God of the New Testament (Stob, 1978). As D. A. Hubbard (personal communication, May 1993) observed, the serenity of character that comes from avoiding the hard existential questions is subtly but radically different from the serenity evidenced in a person who has dared to face and reconcile those existential questions. Given this phenomenon, there may well be limits on the degree to which God image instruments such as the Gorsuch Adjective Checklist (Gorsuch, 1968) can discern between those whose images of God as 'loving' spring from pseudo-maturity versus true maturity of character.

In terms of Brokaw and Edwards' nonsignificant findings with the Rorschach, the present author

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shares their baffled reaction to the counterintuitive nature of the findings. Given that the Blatt, Brenneis, Schimek, and Glick (1976) system restricts Rorschach response scoring to human percepts, it is possible that a more inclusive system of object relations scoring for the Rorschach might yield more significant results in a study such as this. Lerner (1991) described several such scales, including Urist's (1977) Mutuality of Autonomy Scale, Kwawer's (1980) Borderline Interpersonal Relations Scale, Coonerty's (1986) Separation and Individuation Scale, and Ipp's (1986) Developmental Object Relations Scale. Such scales cast their nets over much more of the content of Rorschach protocols than does the Blatt scale, plausibly allowing for more opportunities to detect nuances in levels of object relations. However, the present author is inclined to agree with Brokaw and Edwards that the sample in their study may have been too high functioning for the more pathology-oriented Blatt scale to detect meaningful differences. If that is indeed the case, the four Rorschach object relations scales mentioned above may share the same limitation. It would be fascinating to replicate Brokaw and Edwards' study with an inpatient psychiatric population to test the possibility that Rorschach object relations scales might yield significant results with a more dysfunctional population.

Despite the nonsignificant findings of the Rorschach in this study, the present author affirms the continued use of projective measures in future related research. This is due to the very real possibility echoed by Brokaw and Edwards that more face-valid questionnaires such as the EFAQ may confound the results with social desirability.

In summary, Brokaw and Edwards are to be commended for the valuable contribution that their study makes to the interface of psychoanalytic object relations theory and religious experience. Their hypotheses were logically derived from a coherent theoretical base, providing an excellent rationale for their study. It is also noteworthy that while many researchers avoid the time-consuming rigors of using projective measures in their research, Brokaw and Edwards chose to include the Rorschach in their study. Their choice of this more arduous multi-method research design is to be commended.

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