

1993

# The Effects of God Language on Perceived Attributes of God

Mark R. McMinn

George Fox University, [mmcminn@georgefox.edu](mailto:mmcminn@georgefox.edu)

Sonja D. Brooks

Marcia A. Triplett

Wesley E. Hoffman

Paul G. Huizinga

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac)



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

McMinn, Mark R.; Brooks, Sonja D.; Triplett, Marcia A.; Hoffman, Wesley E.; and Huizinga, Paul G., "The Effects of God Language on Perceived Attributes of God" (1993). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 219.  
[http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp\\_fac/219](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/219)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

# The Effects of God Language on Perceived Attributes of God

MARK R. McMINN  
SONJA D. BROOKS,  
MARCIA A. (HALLMARK) TRIPLETT,  
WESLEY E. HOFFMAN, and  
PAUL G. HUIZINGA

George Fox College  
Newberg, Oregon

**Sixty-three participants listened to an audiotape asking them to imagine themselves in God's presence. Half the participants listened to a script in which God was presented as female and half listened to a script in which God was presented as male. Half of those in each group listened to a male narrator and the other half listened to a female narrator. Before and after listening to the script, participants rated the attributes of God on a forced-choice questionnaire. Those to whom God was presented as female were more likely to emphasize God's mercy at posttest whereas those to whom God was presented as male were more likely to endorse God's power. Those hearing a male voice describe a female God and those hearing a female voice describe a male God reported enjoying the experiment and the audiotape more than those hearing a narrator describing a God of the same gender. Implications are discussed.**

While psychologists have been concerned about transmitting sexism through non-inclusive language (Denmark, Russo, Frieze, & Sechzer, 1988), mainline denominations have been debating which pronouns and descriptors should be used to describe God. More than a decade ago, the United Church of Christ (UCC) published its *Inclusive Language Guidelines for Use and Study in the United Church of Christ* (United Church of Christ, 1980). In this report, the UCC Executive Council affirms the denomination's commitment to

be sensitive to sex and race bias in language use, including references to God. They assert, "Faithful Christians in their use of language are learning to speak of the wholeness of God inclusively" (p. 4). Similarly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America published *Guidelines for Inclusive Use of the English Language* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1989). The report states, "All language ultimately fails to represent God fully.... Masculine or feminine language used to name and describe God must never imply or defend male or female sexuality in the being of God. Language about God that is only and unnecessarily masculine should be avoided" (p. 14). The Presbyterian Church's (1989) *Book of Order* instructs, "to use language which is faithful to biblical truth and which neither purposely nor inadvertently excludes people because of gender, color, or other circumstance in life" (p. W1.2006). American Baptist Churches have published *The Use of Inclusive Language in the Worship of the Church* (American Baptist Churches, 1988), based on an earlier document published by Wesley Theological Seminary. Other mainline denominations have published similar guidelines to affirm the importance of inclusive language in referring to God.

Based on the ubiquity of these publications, it seems likely that God language will be an important issue confronting many Christians, denominations, and individual churches in coming years. Some argue that editing biblical references to God compromises the authority of Scripture. Others argue that paraphrasing such references is appropriate in order to weed out the cultural bias in Scripture.

Although we know that sexist language in general does impact the reader/listener (Benoit and Shell, 1985; Briere and Lanktree, 1983; Dayhoff, 1983), we do not know the effects of non-inclusive God lan-

guage on parishioners. This will be an important area of future research for Christian psychologists for several reasons. First, it is practical and integrative research in that psychological research techniques can be used to answer salient questions being asked in many Christian churches. Second, it is consistent with psychologists' ongoing concern about and sensitivity to sexist language. The American Psychological Association (APA) adopted guidelines for nonsexist language in 1977 and all APA journals have required nonsexist language for submitted manuscripts since 1982 (APA, 1983). Third, many psychotherapists have seen clients whose mistrust of one gender generalizes to God. For example, the woman who has been abused by a father may have difficulty understanding God as a caring father. As Christian clinicians, we need to understand the significance of presenting God in gender-specific terms. This study was conducted in an effort to find how presenting God as male or female affected the perceived attributes of God among college students.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants in the study were 41 women and 22 men recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at George Fox College. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 44 (mean=21.2). All but 2 of the participants reported attending church. All but 2 described themselves as Christians.

### **Procedures**

Participants were randomly given a number between one and four when entering the first testing room. They were then asked to fill out a pretest questionnaire, including some demographic information and three attribute questions, one each to describe their perceptions of their mothers, fathers, and God. The development of the questionnaires is described below.

After completing the pretest questionnaire, participants were instructed to go to one of four rooms, depending on the number they were given as they entered the test room. Each room represented a different treatment condition. Once participants were divided into the four rooms, an experimenter in each room gave the following instructions:

Please put all your possessions on the floor and sit comfortably and quietly. For this experiment you will be listening to a pre-recorded tape. Please follow the instructions the speaker on the tape gives. It is important that you

remain quiet throughout the duration of the experiment. The tape will begin in a moment.

Next, the participants heard one of four versions of a pre-recorded tape. The tape encouraged participants to relax and picture themselves in God's presence. In two of the tapes, God was presented as male and in the other two, God was presented as female. One version of each tape was recorded with a female voice and the other with a male voice. Thus, the four experimental conditions were Male God/Male voice (MG/MV); Female God/Male voice (FG/MV); Male God/Female voice (MG/FV); and Female God/Female voice (FG/FV). The script on the tape recording was:

Sit comfortably in your chair, and relax. Close your eyes and focus on my voice. Take a deep breath in through your nose, hold it briefly, open your mouth and slowly exhale. Sit quietly for a moment and clear your thoughts of the day's activities. (Pause)

Imagine that you are sitting quietly in a room waiting to meet someone. You are alone as you wait, and filled with a calm anticipation of your meeting with the individual.

A door in the room opens and you are invited to enter the adjacent room. You rise from your place and upon going through the door, you find yourself in the presence of God. You are intrigued by (his/her) appearance. Great light fills the room, giving a brilliance to (his/her) demeanor that is like a glittering jewel. You are encompassed by the radiance of the one who was, and is, and is to come. The light that fills the room now saturates your very soul, exposing your entire life. All is revealed—your thoughts and emotions. Nothing is hidden from the eyes of God. (Pause) God speaks words of welcome and asks you to be comfortable in (his/her) presence. As God speaks, (his/her) regard for you is obvious.

God speaks. "Come," (he/she) says, "be dressed in fine linen and receive your new name that I give you. My peace and restoration I also give to you." God extends (his/her) arms and embraces you. You know that having been in (his/her) presence, you will never view your life the same again. (He/She) instructs you to go now, to return to the anteroom and wait again. As you go back through the door, (he/she) speaks to you again, reminding you of (his/her) love for you. (Pause)

As you return to your seat, you take a moment to reflect on what just occurred. (Pause) As soon as you are ready, take a deep breath and open your eyes. Please remain silent until everything has been completed.

After the tape was completed, participants were administered a posttest where they again rated attributes of God and answered several questions regarding their reaction to the experiment. All participants then returned to the first testing room where they were debriefed.

## Questionnaires

The pretest questionnaire included several demographic questions and attribution ratings. The demographic questions asked participants their gender, age, year in school, church attendance patterns, denominational preference, parents' marital status, and whether or not they were Christians.

The attribution rating questions were developed in several steps. First, attributes were selected from Scripture and from a book on the attributes of God (Loeks, 1986). These attributes were then given to a group of twenty-five upper division psychology students who were asked to rate whether each attribute had to do more with God's power or God's mercy. The attributes that were consistently rated as related to God's mercy became the mercy attributes. The average agreement ratio (number of responses identifying the selected attributes as mercy attributes divided by the total number of responses) of those attributes selected for the final questionnaire was .95. Conversely, the attributes consistently rated as related to God's power became the power attributes. The average agreement ratio for power attributes was .93.

Second, the attributes were then put on a 5-point Likert scale and the same twenty-five upper division students were asked to rate how accurately each attribute described God. Because virtually all of the attributes were rated as very descriptive of God, it was determined that a Likert scale would not generate adequate variance for the purposes of this study. Thus, for the final questionnaires, participants were given forced-choice pairings with one mercy attribute and one power attribute and asked to choose which best described their fathers, mothers, or God.

Third, the final questionnaires were developed. On the pretest, each participant had to choose between three pairs of attributes: accepting or powerful, protecting or understanding, strong or friendly. They completed these forced-choice ratings for their fathers, mothers, and God.

On the posttest, participants only rated attributes of God (not mothers and fathers), and had the six forced-choice options: accepting or almighty, majestic or peaceful, strong or compassionate, loving or powerful, protecting or friendly, understanding or all-knowing. They were also asked to rate the value and their enjoyment of the experiment and the tape recording they listened to on 5-point Likert scales.

## Results

The data were analyzed using a 2x2 ANOVA with the gender of God and the gender of the tape recorded voice being the two factors. Dependent variables included the posttest rating of God's power and mercy, measured by the number of power and mercy attributes selected in the posttest questionnaire. To insure there were no pretest differences, the same ANOVA was completed with pretest ratings of mercy and power as dependent variables.

At pretest, there were no differences among groups in ratings of God's mercy or power,  $F(3,49) = .025$ , NS. However, at posttest there was a significant main effect, with God's power being emphasized more by those in the male God (MG) conditions and God's mercy being emphasized more by those in the female God (FG) conditions,  $F(1,49) = 6.763$ ,  $p < .05$ . There was no main effect for the gender of voice on the tape recording and no interaction effects were observed. The differences among groups in perceptions of God are shown in Figure 1.

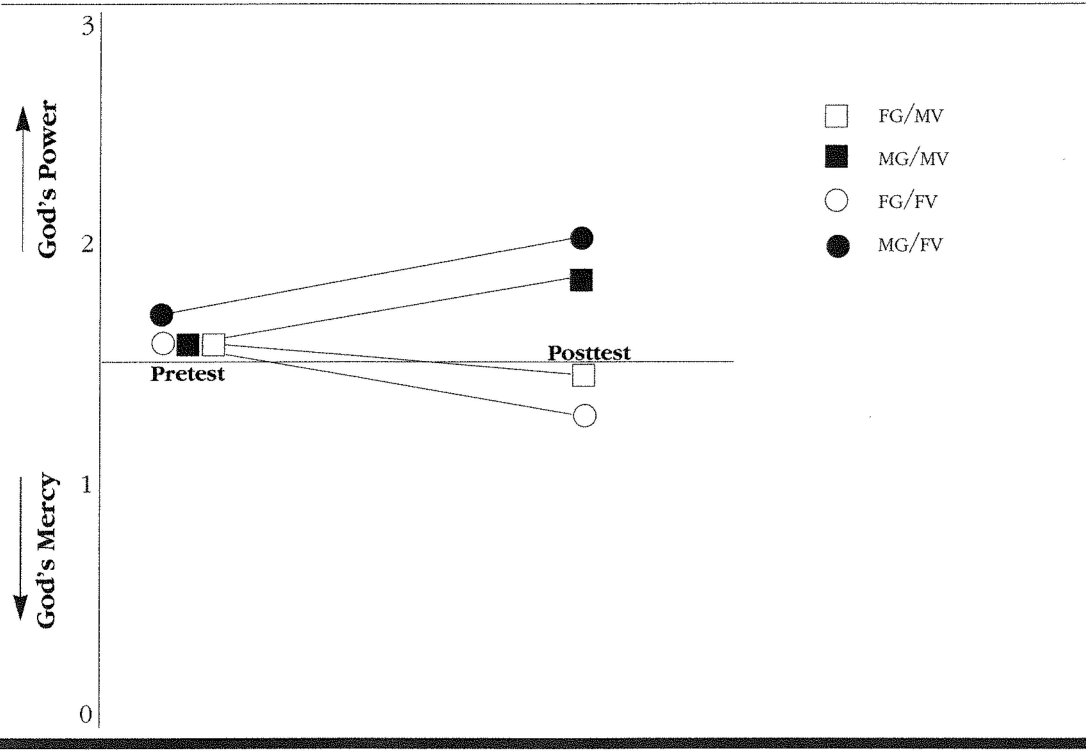
The posttest included three Likert-scale items where participants rated their enjoyment of the experiment and the tape they listened to. Though there were no main effects, there was significant interactions effect on all three of the questions. The participants in the MG/FV and FG/MV groups reported greater enjoyment of the experiment than those in the FG/FV and MG/MV groups,  $F(1,57) = 8.304$ ,  $p < .01$ . A similar interaction emerged on the Likert question, "Did you feel this experiment was worthwhile?",  $F(1,57) = 15.349$ ,  $p < .001$ . The same interaction was also seen in response to the question, "Did you like the tape recording you listened to?",  $F(1,57) = 7.238$ ,  $p < .01$ . These favorability ratings are shown in Figure 2.

To explore whether the gender of the respondent affected views of God, another 2x2 ANOVA was computed with the gender of God and the gender of the participants as independent variables. The same dependent variables were used. No main effects or interactions were found.

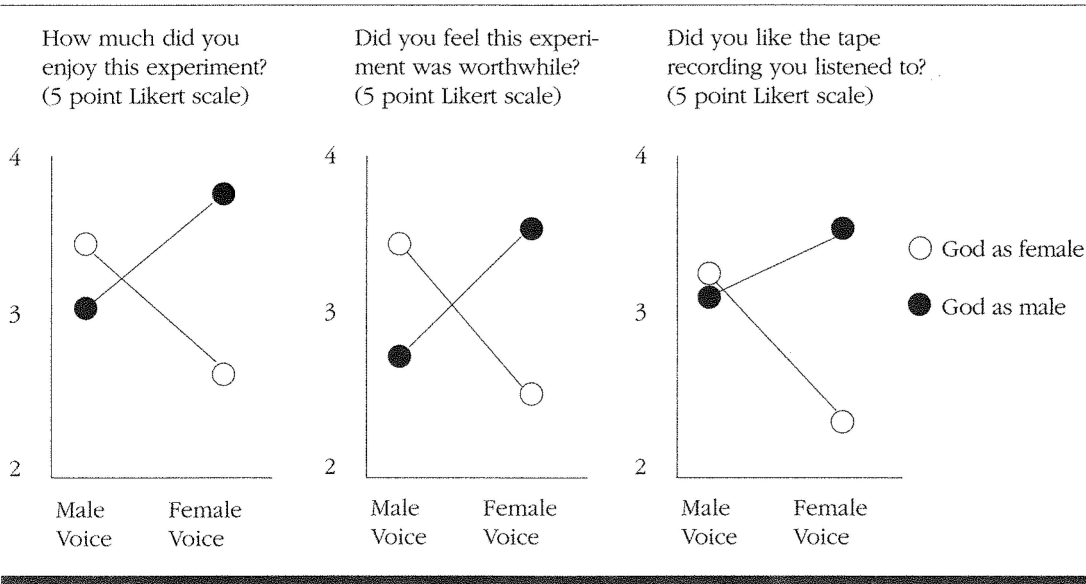
## Discussion

While most mainline denominations have recognized the need to develop inclusive language to refer to God, many fundamentalist and evangelical denominations have avoided changes in God language in affirmation of the authority of Scripture.

**Figure 1**  
*The change in ratings of God's power and mercy from pretest to posttest. A main effect was found for gender of God (FG vs. MG).*



**Figure 2**  
*The favorability ratings by gender of God and voice on the audiotape. Interaction effects were significant for each of the three favorability ratings.*



Because the Bible uses male pronouns, many believe it is important to continue referring to God as masculine. This controversy is likely to continue and escalate in years to come. Although this research is only a preliminary look at the effects of God language, it is an important beginning in an effort to develop empirical evidence for the effects of various references to God.

Those who heard audiotapes where God was presented as female were more likely to emphasize God's attributes of mercy at posttest than those who listened to God presented as male. This gives empirical support for what many have asserted with anecdotal evidence: that people perceive and respond to God differently depending on the gender used to represent God.

Although male pronouns are used throughout Scripture in reference to God, it is important to note the diversity of metaphors and similes used to represent God. God is compared to or presented as midwife (Ps. 22:9-10), mother bear (Hos. 13:8), woman (Ps. 123:2), and hen (Matt. 23:27). Few, if any, would assert that God does not have male sexual characteristics. Perhaps evangelicals and fundamentalists would do well to refer to God more inclusively in order to allow parishioners to experience God's character more fully. Despite the need for inclusive language, previous studies with Christian participants suggests changing gender-specific language is a difficult task (McMinn, Lindsay, Hannum, & Troyer, 1990; McMinn, Troyer, Hannum, & Foster, 1991).

A second finding was that participants responded more favorably to the tape they listened to and the experiment if a female God was presented by a male narrator or a male God was presented by a female narrator than if the narrator and the God language were of the same gender. This may suggest that the gender of the speaker complements or adds credibility to God being presented as the other gender. For example, those who listen to a female narrator present God as female may respond negatively to what they perceive as radical feminism. Those who listen to a male narrator present God as male may also respond negatively because the narrator seems to endorse the status quo. But a female presenting God as male appears safer because she presumably understands women's issues and still chooses to present God as male. Similarly, a male presenting God as female is appealing because he cannot be perceived as taking a radical position for

his own gain.

This study is also notable for the lack of differences between male and female respondents. Although some might predict that males and females would respond differently to the tape recorded descriptions of God, our results show neither overall gender differences nor interaction effects with the sex of the participant and the gender of God. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility that males and females perceive God differently depending on the gender implied, but such differences did not show up in this study. More research will be needed to accurately delineate the relationship between God language and the gender of the listener.

There are at least two implications for pastors and religious leaders that come from this study. First, in order to fully communicate the mercy of God it may be important to select gender neutral or feminine references to God. Referring to God as a loving parent may have a different effect than referring to God as a loving father. Similarly, references to God as male may more powerfully communicate God's power and might to listeners. Thus, in order to communicate the breadth of God's character, it would seem best to follow the example seen in Scripture: choose a diversity of metaphors that emphasize various aspects of God's nature.

Second, male speakers may be perceived as more credible or enjoyable if they refer to the characteristics of God traditionally thought of as feminine. Conversely, female speakers may be perceived as more credible or enjoyable if they refer to the characteristics of God traditionally thought of as masculine. The gender of the speaker may complement the presentation of God.

Clearly, we have much more scientific work to do in order to understand the implications of various types of God language. The major limitation of this study is that there was no gender-neutral presentation of God. It will also be important to do further research on how the gender of the listener affects the response to various forms of God language. It will also be important to study the relationship between theological or denominational ties and responses to alternative presentations of God's gender. Those with beliefs that require a masculine God may take offense at other ways of presenting God. This study provides evidence for what many people have been assuming—that gender-specific references to God affect the way God is perceived.

## REFERENCES

American Baptist Churches. (1988). *The use of inclusive language in the worship of the church*. Valley Forge, PA: Author.

American Psychological Association. (1983). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Benoit, S. S., & Shell, W. (1985). Can sex-biased communication affect business students' career decisions? *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, 28, 123-129.

Briere, J., & Lanktree, C. (1983). Sex-role related effects of sex bias in language. *Sex Roles*, 9, 625-632.

Dayhoff, S. A. (1983). Sexist language and person perception: Evaluation of candidates from newspaper articles. *Sex Roles*, 9, 527-539.

Denmark, F., Russo, N. F., Frieze, I. H., & Sechzer, J. A. (1988). Guidelines for avoiding sexism in psychological research. *American Psychologist*, 43, 582-585.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (1989). *Guidelines for inclusive use of the English language*. Chicago, IL: Author.

*The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Loeks, M. F. (1986). *Glorious names of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

McMinn, M. R., Lindsay, S. F., Hannum, L. E., & Troyer, P. K. (1990). Does sexist language reflect personal characteristics? *Sex Roles*, 23, 389-396.

McMinn, M. R., Troyer, P. K., Hannum, L. E., & Foster, J. D. (1991). Teaching nonsexist language to college students. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 59, 153-161.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (1989). *The Book of Order*. Louisville, KY: Author.

United Church of Christ. (1980). *Inclusive language guidelines for use and study in the United Church of Christ*. St. Louis, MO: Author.

## AUTHORS

MCMINN, MARK R. *Address*: Department of Psychology, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187. *Title*: Professor of Psychology. *Degree*: PhD, Vanderbilt University. *Specializations*: Sexist language, cognitive therapy.

BROOKS, SONJA D. *Address*: House of Hope, PO Box 272, Shefa-Amer, Israel 20200. *Degree*: BA, George Fox College.

(HALLMARK) TRIPLET, MARCIA A., *Address*: 331 Ridgeview Avenue #2, Rockford, IL 61107. *Degree*: BA, George Fox College.

HOFFMAN, WESLEY E. *Address*: 4916 SW 56th Ave. #107, Portland, OR 97221-1949. *Degree*: BA, George Fox College.

HUIZINGA, PAUL G. *Address*: 10920 Robin Spring Lane, Glen Allen, VA 23060. *Degree*: BA, George Fox College.