

Is the image of God related to empathy?

Is the image of God related to empathy? Empirical evidence coming from Bolivian
Catholic university students

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to explore the relationship between two types of God image: a benevolent (merciful, kind, tender, loving and Protector God), and a controlling, severe (firm, authoritarian, strict, wrathful or condemning God), on empathic cognitions and feelings, in a sample of Bolivian Catholic practicing students. For this purpose, a non-probabilistic sample of 260 participants who voluntarily enrolled, 150 female and 110 male, between the ages of 17 and 28, all middle class inhabitants of La Paz City. The participants were measured with the God Image Inventory (benevolent and providence/authoritarian scales) of Lawrence (1997), and with de Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Values of benevolence, authoritarianism, age and gender were considered independent variables, and empathy scores were measured as dependent variable. Descriptive and correlational results showed that overall scores of empathy were consistently related with a benevolent God image; likewise, mean comparison suggested that a benevolent image of God is causally linked to a great empathy. However, the Two Way ANOVA does not allow concluding a clear difference between benevolence and severity influences on empathy, suggesting that a more meticulous research is needed.

Key Words: God image, benevolence, severity, Bolivia, empathy

Resumen

El objetivo del presente artículo es explorar la relación entre dos nociones o imágenes de Dios: un Dios benévolo (misericordioso, amable, tierno, amoroso y protector) y un Dios controlador y severo (firme, autoritario, estricto, airado o condenador), sobre cogniciones

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y sentimientos empáticos, en una muestra de estudiantes practicantes católicos bolivianos. Para este propósito, se enroló voluntariamente a una muestra no probabilística de 260 participantes, 150 mujeres y 110 hombres, con edades entre 17 y 28 años, todos habitantes de clase media de la ciudad de La Paz. Los participantes fueron medidos con el Inventario de la Imagen de Dios (escalas benevolencia y de providencia / autoritarismo) de Lawrence (1997) y con la Escala de Empatía Básica (Jolliffe y Farrington, 2006). Los valores de benevolencia, autoritarismo, edad y género se consideraron variables independientes y los puntajes de empatía fueron medidos como variables dependientes. Los resultados descriptivos y correlacionales mostraron que las puntuaciones globales de empatía se relacionaron consistentemente con la imagen de un Dios benevolente; asimismo, la comparación de medias sugirió que la imagen de Dios bueno y protector está causalmente vinculada con una importante expresión empática. Sin embargo, el ANOVA de dos vías no permitió concluir sobre una clara diferencia entre las ideas de benevolencia y severidad sobre la empatía, lo que sugiere la necesidad de una investigación más meticulosa.

Palabras clave: Imagen de Dios, benevolencia, severidad, Bolivia, empatía

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The current literature concerning the image of God uses this construct in different ways, but mainly as psychological, cognitive or affective representations (Giesbrecht, 1994). The more common perspectives were proposed by authors such as Nelson, Cheek and Au (1985) who found three broad God concepts: Healer (i.e., creator, healer, friend and father); King (i.e., king, judge, master and liberator); and Relational (spouse, mother and lover). On the other hand, Welch and Leege (1988) conducted in Unites Estates a national survey of Catholic parishioners and identified four God concepts: Father (i.e., creator, father, friend, protector, redeemer); Companion (i.e., aware of everything I think, clearly knowable, close, my constant companion); Savior (i.e., dependable, faithful, forgiving) and Judge (i.e., judgmental, strict, master).

For our purposes, by image of God we should understand the God notion or the idea that people form from God themselves; it is a “psychological working model of the sort of person that the individual imagines God to be” (Lawrence, 1997, p 214), and not just an abstract notion or idea. The nature of this construct is not an experiential one as could be for example, the image of the mother, but mostly based on personal needs and associated to particular expressions of religiosity practices (Lawrence, 1997). The image of God has also been associated with self-image. Therefore, someone with a poor concept of himself will hardly develop a lovely image of God (Benson & Spilka, 1973). On the other hand, the theory of the image of God, emphasizes that its development in childhood, depends greatly on parental influences. The ideas of God, would be taken as part of our own identity. Parents would transfer his notion of God to their children along with the rest of their religious ideas. Potvin (1977) for example reported that when parents were highly controllers, the children developed a punitive idea of God. In this way, the family and religious culture influences the image of God to be adopted (Shaap-Jonker et al 2008). However, we are aware that this image is dynamic and can change over time experiencing variations attributable to the social life and cognitive development of each individual.

Lawrence (1997) defines the image of God, from a series of dimensions that are included in his "God Image Inventory". These dimensions, operationalized through eight scales (presence, challenge, acceptance, benevolence, influence, providence, faith and salience), allows us to objectively approach to an integral vision of God image.

It has been pointed out that both in theology and in psychology signals can be found that each individual has a clear idea of God derived mainly, for the case of the Judeo-

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Christian tradition, from the Old Testament (Altmann, 1968). However, it is also evident that the conception we have of God occurs in addition to the legacy of the New Testament. This double influence, according to some authors (Castillo, 2005) has led to identify, among others, two strong ideas of God:

The God, who has been taught to us in the Christian tradition, is a mixture of three distinct representations of Divinity: The Yakvéae of the Jewish tradition, the Absolute (infinite, omnipotent, and eternal) of Greek metaphysics, and the father of whom Jesus of Nazareth spoke to us (...) The God of the armies, Nationalist, Righteous and Punisher, spoken in some of the traditions of the Old Testament, cannot harmonize with that Father of whom Jesus spoke to us, the Father who is good to all, and who is thus reflected in the Gospels: (‘That you may be the children of your father who is in heaven, who brings forth his sun upon evil and good, and which makes it rain upon righteous and unrighteous’, Matthew, 5:45; or ‘Before well, love your enemies, and do well, and lend not expecting anything in return, and your reward shall be great, and you shall be children of the Most High; for He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked’, Luke 6:35), (Castillo, 2005, pp 23-24).

Following this dichotomy, in the present study it was taken that both ideas - not necessarily opposing to each other - by its nature would allow to study two visions of God, hoping that both clarify at the same time, different conceptions of the religious practices, as well as interpersonal relationships. There are in theory not few attempts to study the effect or influence of these ideas of God on the behavior of people. An example of the empirical relevance of this relationship is offered by Shariff & Norenzayan (2007), who examined the effect of God concepts specifically on selfish and pro-social behavior. They introduced an experimental procedure to activate God concepts using the Dictator game. They found that when it comes to providing resources for other people, they are more generous and more abundant than when not invoking the name of God. This results suggest that, for many people, the mediation of the notion of God is important in the characterization of human relations.

Likewise, Francis along several investigations (see Francis 2002, and Francis et al, 2012), found, in the first case, negative correlations between the personal sense of well-being and a punitive image of God. In the second, a study conducted in United Kingdom, he

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identified associations between the image of a merciful God and high scores of empathy, and between the image of a righteous God and low levels of empathy.

In the direction of the aforementioned studies, the results suggest that there would be reasons to think that empathy (empathy in general and its cognitive and affective forms, in particular), is more related to an image of a benevolent, loving and protective God than with that of a distant and severe God.

The God image has been associated with several psychological expressions such as self-esteem (Buri & Mueller, 1993; Francis, Gibson & Robbins, 2001), attachment styles (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002 and De Roos et al., 2001), well-being (Francis, 2002, Wiegand & Weiss, 2006, and Steenwyk, et al., 2010), and pro-social behavior (Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis, 1993; Yodrabum, 2005; Hardy & Carlo, 2005 and Robins, Francis & Kerr, 2006).

A recent research paper (Roth, 2017) reported the relationship between emphatic concern, religiosity and spirituality as cause variables of pro-social behavior. The study has also considered the influence of other variables such as age, sex, religious creed and ethnicity, in a catholic sample of university students. The results of this study showed, through structured equation modeling procedures, strong causal ties between empathy and spirituality with pro-social behavior; religiosity (understood as the exercise of religious practice), on the other hand, did not prove to be influential enough.

Although the model seems to be acceptable, some other considerations are needed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of empathy's conceptual framework. For example, it was evident that the religiosity variable could be modulated by the concept that people have of God, since it is far to be unique or invariant. Francis, Croft & Pyke, (2012), found that differences in empathic behavior are not the result of religious identity of Muslims and Christians, but of the image of God that people have within the framework of these religions. Therefore, those who have the idea of a merciful and protective God expressed higher levels of empathy than those who conceived God as righteous and severe authority. On the other hand, Robins, Francis & Kerr, 2006 found significant correlation between positive God images and greater empathic capacity, after controlling for gender and for individual differences in personality.

Therefore, regardless of the diversity of images that characterize God as omnipresence, omnipotence or others, the purpose of the present research is to explore the relationship between two types of God image: a benevolent image (merciful, kind, tender, loving and Protector God), and a controller, severe image (firm, authoritarian, strict, wrathful or

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condemning God), on empathic cognitions and feelings in a sample of Bolivian Catholic practitioners students.

The main assumption underpinning this study is that those people who possess a representation of God mainly focused on benevolence, express higher levels of empathy (cognitive and affective) than those who advocate the idea of a controller God.

METHOD

Sample and participants. The convenient non-probabilistic sample of participants consisted of 260 Catholic university students, 112 of them active practitioners, (43.0 %). One hundred and ten male (42.7 %) and 150 (57.3 %) female, between the ages of 17 and 28 (Mean = 20.94 and ED = 1.93), who accepted to answer the measurement scales, after to be fully informed about the purpose of the research and on the requirements for participating. All respondents were middle-class citizens of La Paz city, Bolivia.

Measurements. The sample responded to two instruments: the God Image Inventory (GII, Benevolent and Providence/Authoritarianism Scales, Lawrence, 1997), and the Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

a. *GII-Benevolence Scale (BS).* This scale focus on the object rather than the subject, in the character of God emphasizing the loving nature of God's relationship: "Is God the sort of person who would want to love me?" Twenty-two items with five response options originally composed the benevolence scale: 1 = never, 5 = always.

The original reliability analysis of BS carried out by Lawrence in three different samples, obtained Cronbach Alpha values not below of .91; and the author reported that preliminary validity analysis has also been done with relative success. Content validity of this scale shows an acceptable correlation with the Wrightsman (1964) Altruism Scale.

Concerning the Bolivian study, 12 of the 22 original items were applied, 10 were removed during local preliminary testing of reliability and wording analysis. Reliability analysis with 12 items showed a Cronbach's Alpha = .747, lower than that obtained by Lawrence. The construct validity through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (Principal Component's extraction method) recommended a bi-factorial scale structure, explaining 61.6 % of the total variance.

b. *GII-Providence Scale (PS).* This scale as was thought by the author, takes into consideration two main aspects: the influence factor or "How much can I control God?" and the second question, labeled Providence: "How much can God control me?" (Lawrence, 1997), allowing to obtain measures of an authoritarian image.

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Twenty-two items with similar response structure also composed the PS. The author reported a good reliability scores in three different samples (Cronbach's Alpha never bellow .92). With respect to content validity, Providence (Authoritarianism) scale correlated well ($r = .63$) with the Koppin (1976) God Control Scale.

For the purposes of the present study, only 5 items of PS were used. All these items are clearly related with God distance and lack of attachment perception: "God does not do much to determine the outcome of my life". Reliability exploration of the five items showed a Cronbach's Alpha of .71. EFA using Principal Component's extraction method recommended a mono-factorial scale structure, explaining 40 % of the total variance.

c. *Basic Empathy Scale (BES)*. The Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) has nine items designed to measure global empathy; nevertheless, it can also be used to evaluate cognitive and affective empathy independently. In a previous study (Roth, 2017), BES was adapted to Bolivian population with the following outcomes: the global reliability score through Cronbach's Alpha was .82, and reliability indicators for both sub - scales (Cronbach's Alpha Cognitive Empathy = .76; Affective Empathy = .79), seems to be acceptable. In addition, the construct validity (EFA) recommended two factor structure scale, explaining the 58.4% of the total variance, and the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) reported $CMIN/df = 34.413$, $p = .007$; $RMR = .041$; $GFI = .976$; and $RMSEA = .059$.

Procedure. The survey was conducted through the application of two scales, which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The experimenter administered the scales in Spanish during a regular class period.

Variables and data analysis. In this study, two different values of benevolence and providence of God's image, age of participants and gender, were considered as independent variables. Empathy scores (general, cognitive and affective) were measured as dependent variable. The main variables were explored and subjected to tests of normality. While the test of Kolmogorov-Smirnov rejected the hypothesis of normality, for all cases, the values of skewness and kurtosis, as well as M estimators, were acceptable, so we assumed relatively normal distributions. SPSS was used for processing and data analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive information. Table 1 presents descriptive information regarding main variables. The participants in this study were divided into two broad categories depending

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on their responses to the benevolence or severity scales (low and high benevolence, and high and low severity). The results were related by demographic and dependent variables in order to obtain Chi-Square indicators for each relationship.

As can be seen, the variations in age do not seem to be linked to the image of God. Women, unlike men, however, show that they are highly and significantly related to a benevolent representation of God ($\chi^2 = 6.076$, $p < .05$). In addition, men and women do not differ in their scores on the severity scale.

The overall scores of empathy, and the two forms of empathy (cognitive and affective), seem to be mostly related to the image of a benevolent God. Note that in all cases, Chi-Square values are highly significant when it comes to test such relationship.

Table 1 Relationship of age, gender, and empathy variables with different values of God image.

Variable/Category	Low Benevolence (N=73)		High Benevolence (N=187)		χ^2	p	Low Severity (N=94)		High Severity (N=166)		χ^2	p
	N	%	N	%			n	%	n	%		
	Age:											
17-20 Años	33	26.8	90	73.2	.180	.671	42	34.1	81	65.9	.408	.523
21-28 Años	40	29.2	97	70.8			52	38.0	85	62.0		
Gender:												
Male	40	36.0	71	64.0	5.076	.014	44	39.6	67	60.4	1.020	.313
Female	33	22.1	116	77.9			50	33.6	99	66.4		
Empathy:												
Low Cognitive	42	40.8	61	59.2			44	42.7	59	57.3		
High Cognitive	31	19.7	126	80.3	13.623	.000	50	31.8	107	68.2	3.184	.074
Low Affective	41	40.6	60	59.4			44	43.6	57	56.4		
High Affective	32	20.1	127	79.9	12.814	.000	50	31.4	109	68.6	3.929	.047
Low Empathy Tot	48	42.9	64	57.1			46	41.1	66	58.9		
High Empathy Tot	25	16.9	123	83.1	21.285	.000	48	32.4	100	67.6	2.061	.151

Correlation analysis. Table 2 presents the correlation matrix of the different analyzed variables. It can be observed that all forms of empathy correlated positively and significantly with a benevolent image of God. The exception was severity, emphasizing a

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distant and controlling God image. High correlation indices were not so high to suspect multicollinearity effects.

Table 2 Inter-correlation matrix of the relevant research variables (N = 260).

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Empathy (Affective)	1				
2 Empathy (Cognitive)	.216**	1			
3 Empathy (Total)	.781**	.779**	1		
4 Benevolence	.187**	.184**	.237**	1	
5 Severity	.061	.079	.090	.149*	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Mean comparisons. Table 3 presents *t* values, derived from mean scores, comparing empathy response in groups exhibiting different values of relevant independent variables: gender, benevolence image and severity image. The values in table 3 shows significant differences between the means of empathy of men and women, favoring women. It also shows that a high value in benevolent image is causally related to a greater empathy. Additionally, the values of the Levene test report on the homogeneity of variances.

Table 3 Comparison of empathy means in male and female groups and in high and low levels of benevolence and severity (N = 260).

Variable	Empathy Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Levene Test	
					<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender						
Male	29.20	4.95	-3.95	.000	.019	.432
Female	31.77	5.34				
God Image						
High Benevolent	31.72	5.10	-5.29	.000	.027	.869
Low Benevolent	28.01	4.97				

From Table 4, it could be concluded that a highly benevolent God image could cause both types of empathy (cognitive: $t = -4.50$, $p = .000$, and affective $t = -3.59$, $p = .000$). By contrast, comparisons between high and low levels of severity on the corresponding scale were statistically significant only for cognitive empathy ($t = -2.19$, $p = .029$).

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These results would seem to indicate the existence of a differential effect on the expression of empathy, directly associated with the type of image of God adopted.

Table 4 Cognitive and affective empathy means comparison of groups with high and low values of benevolence and severity (N = 260).

Variable	Cognitive Empathy						Affective Empathy					
	Mean	S.D.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Levene		Mean	D.S.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Levene	
					<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>					<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
God Image												
High Benevolent	18.87	3.07	-4.50	.000**	.385	.052	12.83	3.46	-3.59	.000**	2.02	.156
Low Benevolent	16.83	3.77					11.17	3.02				
High Severe	18.65	3.28	-2.19	.029*	.067	.796	12.68	3.52	-1.97	.051	2.41	.121
Low Severe	17.69	3.54					11.81	3.17				

** $p < .01$

* $P < .05$

Two Way Analysis of variance. In addition, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to study the influence of the benevolent and severe image of God variables, both with two values (high and low), and the interaction effect of these variables on participant's empathic expression. The results are presented in table 5.

As can be seen, the representation of a benevolent God exerts a clear causal influence on the empathic response ($F_{\text{Benevolence}} = 28.89$, $p = .000$). However, the influence of a severity image is also evident although clearly lower ($F_{\text{Severity}} = 8.22$, $p = .004$). This would mean that the recognition of God could, regardless of the type of image that represents it, be enough to explain the empathic expression. However, taking into account the size of the effect associated to both variables under the column of Partial Eta Squared, the influence of benevolence image ($PES_{\text{Benevolence}} = .101$) is far more relevant than that of severity image ($PES_{\text{Severity}} = .031$). Finally, the interaction benevolence-severity did not prove to be significant.

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Table 5 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Total Empathy							
Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	
Corrected Model	942,639 ^a	3	314,213	12,572	,000	,128	
Benevolence	722,043	1	722,043	28,890	,000	,101	
Severity	205,496	1	205,496	8,222	,004	,031	
Benevolence * Severity	89,829	1	89,829	3,594	,059	,014	
Error	6398,223	256	24,993				
Total	252020,000	260					

a. R Squared = ,128 (Adjusted R Squared = ,118)

Figure 1 confirms that the highest levels of benevolent image of God produce significant higher marginal means of empathy than low levels of benevolent representation of God. However, at the same time, higher levels of severity God image produce higher levels of empathy mean scores. High values of severity are associated with greater means of empathy scores; this effect is particularly evident when individuals expressed a less benevolent image of God.

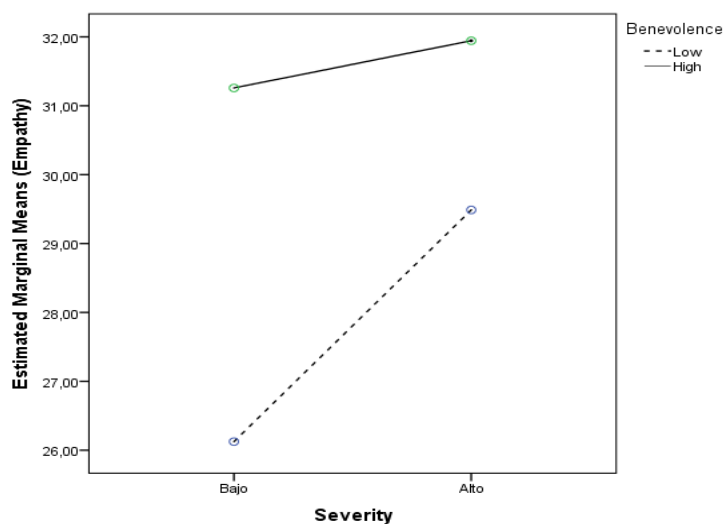


Figure 1 Differences in estimated marginal means of empathy produced by high and low benevolent and severity God representation

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In other words, the results show that having a firm or strong idea of God based on the benevolence, goodness, protection, love, etc., favors the cognitive and affective empathic response, much more so than when people holds just an unconvinced idea of his goodness. However, advocating vigorously the idea of a severe God improved also the means of empathy scores, particularly for those who maintain a too low idea of a benevolent God. This result leant us to consider that, despite the lack of influence of a severity God idea on empathy, there could be a moderator effect of this variable on the relationship 'idea of a benevolent God - empathy'. However, the analysis performed through interaction with multiple linear regression confirmed a non-significant moderating effect of the severe God idea. ($F_{\text{Change}} = .199$, $p = .656$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present research are in line with the studies of Shariff & Norenzayan (2007), Francis et al, (2012), Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis, (1993); Yodrabum, (2005); Hardy & Carlo (2005), Robins, Francis & Kerr (2006) and Croft & Pyke, (2012), which link the idea of God with differential levels of empathy and pro-social behavior. All of them emphasize that the way we imagine God exerts a clear influence on the way we express our feelings and behave accordingly, with our peers. Apparently the concept we have of God reflects an image that shapes an identity that in turn determines a particular way of behaving. If the God we recognize and love projects mainly an image of severity, we should expect this image to model in his followers a similar behavior that regulates their interpersonal relationships. This conclusion in our study can be sustained only partially because although those who are influenced by an idea of benevolence showed significantly greater means of empathy than those who adopt the idea of God's severity, those who hold a high concept of severity also exhibit relatively high empathic levels. This would probably mean that the empathic expression, besides being associated with the idea of benevolence in general or with the idea of a high severity of God, could be found mainly related with a solid notion of a supreme being that rules the moral standards with absolute clarity (lovingly or firmly).

Finally, it must be recognized that the lack of representativeness of the sample in this study is an aspect that limits the scope of the results and forces us to be cautious about our conclusions. Likewise, it must be remembered that the image of God was only explored from a Catholic perspective, which also prevents generalizations to other religious creeds.

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