

# Can God lift a heavy rock? The relationship between beliefs about God's power and prayer practices

Elissa O'Dell, Darrin VanMeter, Matthew Aguilar, & Dr. Melanie Nyhof  
Northwestern College

## Abstract

Research on adult petitionary prayer indicates domain differences in prayer requests with adults are more likely to ask God for psychological than biological or physical interventions. What people pray for may depend on their view of what God can do. Do adult beliefs in what God can do also vary by domain? Do mainstream Christian adults view each person in the Trinity as equally omnipotent? Are God concepts related to prayer? In Study 1, adult participants completed a questionnaire consisting of questions about what different agents (God, a superhero, and a Dad) can do. The actions varied by domain (physical, biological, and psychological). Participants were asked for explanations for each response and asked questions about demographics, religious affiliation and religious practices. In Study 2, adults completed a questionnaire with a prayer scale (Ladd & Spilka, 2006) and questions about what different members of the Trinity and a teacher can do in different domains. Results will be discussed in terms of differences in responses for agents and domain and connections between God concepts and prayer.

## Hypotheses

### Study 1

We expect that participants will view God as more often being able to perform the psychological actions, then the biological, and least likely to be able to perform the physical.  
We predict that participants will view God as being able to perform psychological actions more than a superhero and a superhero more than a dad.

### Study 2

We expect that participants will view God as more often being able to perform the psychological actions, then the biological, and least likely to be able to perform the physical.  
We predict that God the father will be viewed as more capable of the actions than Jesus or the Holy Spirit.  
We predict that participants will differ in their prayer responses by member of the Trinity.

## Background

### Study 1

There has been some disagreement on how people view God and God's actions. Some research suggests that adults and children alike anthropomorphize when answering questions about God (Heiphetz et al., 2016). Other research has found that children do not necessarily give God human characteristics (Barrett et al., 2001; Nyhof & Johnson, 2017). Further research was needed to better understand the beliefs held by adults, and children, about what God can do.

Barrett's (2001) research found that adults are prone to ask God in prayer for psychological help rather than biological or physical help. With this information, it is believed that adults will view God's abilities different in the psychological, biological, and physical realms.

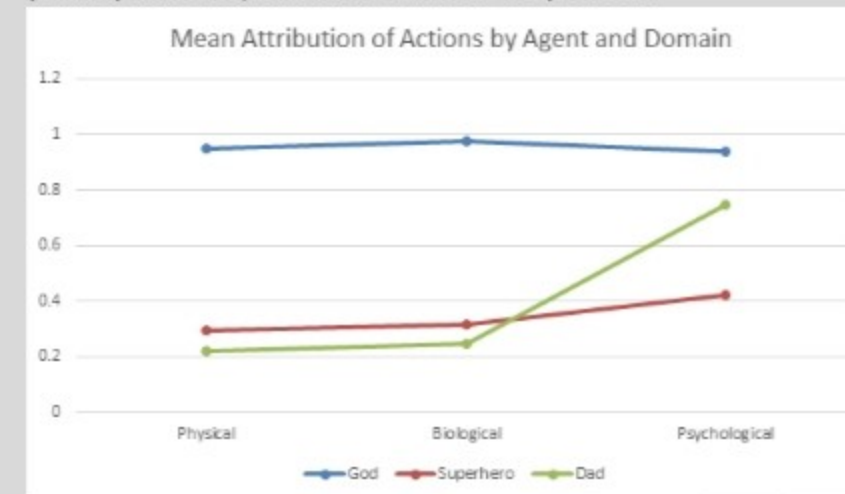
To test our first hypothesis, adults were asked in a survey what actions they believe God can do, ranging across psychological, biological, and physical, as compared to a superhero and their father.

### Study 2

In Study 2, we wanted to look at the connections between what people think God can do and how they pray. Ladd and Spilka (2006) verified a scale identifying the connections people make during prayer: inward, outward, and upward. Ladd has also conducted a study focused on how Christians view the Trinity during prayer. To further this study and connect it with our previous research and hypothesis, we conducted a second study.

A repeated measures Anova (Agent (3) x Domain(3)) revealed significant main effects of both Agent ( $F(2) = 62.98, p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .741) and Domain ( $F(2) = 33.42, p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .603), and a significant Agent x Domain interaction ( $F(4) = 22.92, p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .510).

Participants viewed God as the most powerful in all three domains and that the Superhero was only slightly more powerful in the physical and biological domains than a Dad. Surprisingly, participants responded that a Dad would be able to do the actions in the psychological domain. Future analyses will examine participants' explanations of their responses.



For this study, participants were asked to fill out the prayer scale used by Ladd to determine what people think about or connect with during prayer. This scale was completed 4 times by each participant; the first time as general questions about prayer, and then one time each with the participant asked to answer the questions as if they were praying to each of the Trinitarian parts.

Participants were then asked to answer questions about God's abilities. This time, however, they were asked specifically about if each part of the Trinity, a human, or no one could do that action. In relation to our previous hypothesis and study, the questions were based on psychological, biological, and physical actions. Data collection for this study is ongoing.

## Proposed Research

A third study, which is based on the past two studies, is currently in the process of collecting data. It focuses on children's concept of the Trinity and asking children some of the same questions in study 1. We removed superhero as a stimuli and instead are asking children if God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or their Dad can do what the questions are asking.



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