God images and religious rituals in context of dissociative experiences

Sarah Demmrich, Uwe Wolfradt, & Michael Domsgen

Department of Psychology and Theology

Martin- Luther- University Halle- Wittenberg, Germany

Email: sarahdemmrich@uni-halle.de

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Abstract

This questionnaire survey examines in 157 religious adults from different denominations and religions (Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, Adventist, New Apostolic, Mormon, Bahá'i) whether religious ritual is connected with increased experiences of depersonalisation and the influence of the image of God. Furthermore an examination will be made whether members of New Religious Movements (NRM) and Bahá'i religion practice more rituals and hence experience more depersonalisation. The results show an increased experience of depersonalisation if ritual is high valued, but not if rituals were performed frequently. Members of NRM and Bahá'i religion perform rituals more often but at the same time do not cherish them more. They also do not experience depersonalisation more often than others. Rituals that are performed frequently are probably felt as meaningless and do not trigger deviant- altered experiences like depersonalisation. A non- accepting image of God is connected with depersonalisation. Beyond that a positive God image can be regarded as a protective factor which decreases the relationship between importance of ritual and experience of depersonalization.

Keywords

ritual, depersonalization, God image, New Religious Movements, Christianity

Introduction

"*The word […] beginneth to enlarge my soul"*[1].

What do people experience during a religious ritual? In which altered states of consciousness can they enter? Concerning rituals, like prayers or meditation, believers of all religions report mystic experiences. Religious rituals point to the Transcendence, they bring along a self- loss, a self- forgetfulness. Temporal and spatial borders were transcended and an altered reality can be experienced (Goethals, 1990). Through aiming for unity with the Transcendent during rituals the borders of the human self disappear. The focus during rituals changes: it is translocated from the own person to the relationship with the Transcendent (Bucher, 2007; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). How can we explain and acquire this altered, extraordinary state of consciousness (Sudbrack, 2002) in psychology?

Schumaker (1995) calls this altered state dissociation. This is an interruption of the integrated processing of psychological and/ or sensorial information. He postulates that religious rituals are cues for dissociative experiences. During dissociation a higher cognitive control is turned off so that religious suggestions are possible. These suggestions are very often inconsistent with reality. The rituals are necessary to believe this contradictory information and to strengthen faith.

According to this theory, Dorahy and Lewis (2001) postulate further, differential statements. They assume that individuals that show a high commitment to their community (these kind of communities were rated as rigid, high structured) rely on more dissociation to strengthen their faith. This is in contrast to people with weak commitment (that means in liberal communities): they should experience less dissociation. In their study Dorahy and Lewis (2001) found a positive relationship between the importance of religious rituals and the experience of dissociation in rigid, high structured religious communities ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). Conversely they found this relationship not at liberal communities.

Dorahy, Schumaker, Krishnamurthy and Kumar (1997) evaluated Schumaker's theory (1995) in different cultural- religious contexts. They assumed that in western religions there is a depletion of religious rituals, in contrast to eastern religions. The hypothesis from Dorahy *et al.* (1997) is that individuals in eastern countries experience more dissociation than individuals in western countries. They examined this in Australia (as western religion) India (as eastern religion) whereby Indian religions are marked by a high ritualistic component. Indeed they verify their hypothesis: there is a positive relationship between the importance of

religious rituals and the experience of dissociation in Indians (r = .08, p < .05) but not in Australians. Additionally religious ritual is a significant predictor for dissociation.

In the present study we examine if Schumaker's theory (1995) can be considered for a specific form of dissociation: depersonalization (Waller, Putnam, & Carlson, 1996; Wolfradt, 2003). Depersonalization is characterized by emotional numbing, altered body experiences, visual derealization and heightened self- observation (Sierra & Berrios, 2001). Important to note is that in the present study depersonalization is defined as "a subjective form of experience […], that is characterized by deviant- altered cognitive- perceptual and affective processes […]" (Wolfradt, 2003, S. 36, translated by the authors). Depersonalization can be seen as a normal form of experience (Roberts, 1960) and manifest itself as a psychological disorder only under certain conditions. Experiences of depersonalization are quite common in non- clinical populations (Dixon, 1963; Jacobs & Bovasso, 1996). Upon these theoretical assumptions depersonalization, with facing away from the own person to the transcendence of self, is obvious during religious rituals.

In this context the God image is very important. God image means all individual emotional aspects that are attributed to God (Rizzuto, 1979). Rizzuto (1979) distinguishes between concept and image of God. Concept of God is the cognitive and theological understanding of God. A believer develops this God concept based on religious doctrines. It is also the dominant factor in conscious thinking: if a person is asked about God than he or she is prone to speak about their God concept. In contrast to this, the God image is the sum of all emotional experiences of a person with God. The emotions that are connected with the God image are mostly undifferentiated because they were created unconsciously and are not aware to the individual. Rizzuto (1979) hypothesizes that every child that grows up in western civilisation creates a God image. While growing up the child's God image can be suppressed so that the person does not develop a faith in God. This happens especially when the God image consists of negative emotions. That means the probability that an adult believes in God is higher if the person has a positive God image. Since only religious people are consulted in the present study they should report mainly positive God images.

The God image as an ensemble of emotional aspects of believers could influence rituals and therein experienced states. A negative, in contrast to a positive, God image (e. g. God is feared, is punitive) could trigger more negative emotions and cognitions during rituals (and above). Also Murken (1998) postulates the influence of God image: a negative God image is associated with a decreased psychic well-being though there is no reciprocal relationship. Murken (1998) emphasizes the high relevance of negative emotions as specific

factors of vulnerability. Since depersonalization is experienced mostly negative (Trueman, 1984) it is considered as an aspect of decreased psychic well-being in the present study. We want to verify which aspects of the God image are related to depersonalization so that they are potential factors of vulnerability. Moreover, the God image as a moderator on the relationship between ritual und depersonalization is evaluated.

Study aims

This study aims (a) to examine if the frequency of prayers and attendance of religious events as well as the importance of religious rituals show a positive relationship to depersonalization. Previous theories and empirical results imply a connection between ritual and dissociation. Is there also a connection between rituals and depersonalization as a specific form of dissociation?

(b) Furthermore the relationship between God image and depersonalization should be specified. The entire facets of God image will be involved. This should give information about negative emotional aspects that could rank as characteristic vulnerability factors. Above this we investigate if God image moderates the relationship between depersonalization and ritual.

(c) Religious-psychological research seems to be limited to their sample assortment: almost exclusively Protestant samples were examined (Cutting & Walsh, 2008). The aim of the present study is to get a broader view for entire denominations. For that reason three traditional denominations (Catholic, Protestant, Methodist), three New Religious Movements (Adventist, Mormon, New Apostolic) as well as one non Christian religion (Bahá'i) were included.

(d) Finally we want to go into differential aspects of religiosity. Traditional communities are primarily oriented towards rites of passage (e. g. baptism, marriage ceremony). Beyond that New Religious Movements (NRM) perform more rituals that are geared to lifestyle and well-being (Domsgen, 2004). Similarly we assume this for the Bahá'i religion because it provides several rituals in the course of the day. It is presumed that members of NRM and Bahá'i religion perform more rituals, value rituals as more important and experience more depersonalization than members of traditional communities.

Method and procedure

Sample

The respondents were 157 adults (n = 84 female) between the age of 19 and 72 years (M = 33.51 years, SD ± 13.21 years) with membership to one of the following religious groups: Catholic (n = 25), Protestant (n = 27), Methodist (n = 16), Adventist (n = 19), Mormon (n = 24), New Apostolic (n = 23) and Bahá'i (n = 22). There was n = 1 Baptist who was excluded in the comparing analyses. The distribution of age and gender of the entire groups is presented in table 1.

Measures

The variable *ritual* was operationalized in different ways: the frequency of rituals was examined through the question about the frequency of church attendance ("How often do you attend religious events per year?") and the question about the frequency of prayers ("How often do you pray/ meditate per week?"). Furthermore the importance of rituals was examined by the *Religious Ritual Scale* (RRS; Maranell, 1974). The RRS consists of twelve items. These are measured from 0 to 4. A sample item is "The ritual of worship is a very important part of religion". In the present study the internal consistency is α = .88.

Depersonalization was measured by the Skala zur Erfassung von Depersonalisationserfahrungen (*SDPE*; Wolfradt, 2003). The subjects should indicate how often they experience 20 events in the last twelve months from "never" = 1 to "very often" = 5. Higher scores indicate higher frequency of depersonalized experiences. The SPDE measures four aspects of depersonalization: disorder of *self- experience* (e. g. "Sometimes my body seems to be detached , as my body and my person are separated from each other."), *disorder of self- awareness* (e. g. "I cannot really estimate my abilities."), *disorder of self- assurance* (e. g. "I do certain things without knowing why.") and *derealization* (e. g. "The world seems blurry and deformed to me."). In this study the internal consistency of the global scale is α= .91 (from α = .70 for *self- assurance* to α = .79 for *derealization*).

The *God Image Inventory* (GII; Lawrence, 1997) is a 72- item questionnaire ranged from 1 to 4. Higher scores indicate more positive God images. It surveys six aspects of God image: *Influence* (e. g. "God almost always answers my prayers."), *Providence* (e. g. "I often feel that I am in the hands of God."), *Presence* (e. g. „I feel warm inside when I pray."), *Challenge* (e. g. "God asks me to keep growing as a person."), *Acceptance* (e. g. "I am confident of God's love for me.") and *Benevolence* (e. g. "I think God even loves atheists."). The GII (Lawrence, 1997) was revised by excluding high unreliable items. In the present

study the internal consistency amounts to α = .94 (from α = .69 for *Providence* to α = .86 for *Presence*).

Results

Correlative relationships

There is a correlation between depersonalization and the *importance* of rituals (r = .23, p < .01), but not with the frequency of prayers and church attendance. Furthermore depersonalization and the facet of God image *Acceptance* are negatively correlated (r = - .28, p < .001).

There are high intercorrelations between the entire facets of God image with the global score (for *Acceptance* and global God image r = .82, p < .001). Because of that we considered the global God image score for further calculations. The correlative relationships between God Image, ritual, and depersonalization are presented in table 2.

Differences between traditional communities and NRM

There is a high significant discrimination by use of *t*- test between traditional communities and NRM/ Bahá'i referring to ritual aspects. Members of NRM and Bahá'i religion pray/ meditate noticeably more and attend religious events more frequently than members of traditional communities. Remarkably there are no differences between these two groups regarding to importance of rituals and depersonalization. Yet the God image differs significantly: members of NRM/ Bahá'i state a more positive God image than members of traditional communities. The results of the *t*- tests are shown in table 3.

Additionally the entire religious denominations were analysed regarding to ritual and depersonalization by Post- hoc analysis. Indeed the results for frequency of prayer and church attendance show the supposed group differences between the tradition and the non- traditional churches/ Bahá'i although with overlaps. Regarding the importance of rituals there are two subgroups that are not according to the supposed differences (Bahá'i and Adventists value rituals less important than expected). With respect to depersonalization no subgroups significantly differ from each other.

Results of the moderated regression analysis

The results show a moderating effect of God Image on the relationship between importance of rituals and depersonalization ($\beta = 2.84$, $t = 3.05$, $p < .01$) . The means are illustrated in image 1. A positive God image shows decreased depersonalization and decreased importance of rituals in contrast to a negative God image.

Discussion

The present results confirm a relationship between religious ritual and depersonalization. Schumaker's (1995) assumption, that dissociation is experienced during rituals, can be transferred to depersonalization. Depersonalization seems to be a subform of dissociation and shows at least part of altered states of consciousness during religious rituals. The correlation between ritual and depersonalization is lower than with dissociation (Dorahy & Lewis, 2001). One possible reason for that is that depersonalisation is only one of more subforms of dissociation. Other dissociative experiences as well, like absorption or short- term amnesia, could also be experienced. The only medium correlation by Dorahy and Lewis (2001) points to more extraordinary experience qualities which could be experienced during rituals.

In the present study it could not be proven if a person experiences depersonalization *during* rituals. It could be assumed that a person that performs rituals experience depersonalization in a distinct, non- religious part of life. Moreover we cannot prove the cause- and- effect relationship: it is possible that people rate the importance of rituals high because they experience more depersonalization. That seems plausible when we have a look on different parts of life: people that experience more negative aspects of depersonalization in non-religious parts of life rate the importance of rituals more because they can mask these negative experiences during prayer. This would open a new theoretical approach transcending Schumaker's theory (1995) to emotion- regulation processes.

There is no relationship between *depersonalization and the frequency* of prayers and church attendance but with importance of rituals. Probably high important rated rituals are not meaningless. Vice versa this implies that frequent practiced, low important rituals are mostly meaningless and do not lead to altered states of consciousness, like depersonalization.

A negative God image is associated with experiences of depersonalization. Especially the facet *Acceptance* plays an important role and could be classified as a specific vulnerability factor according to Murken (1998). Individuals that believe in God but at the same time feel not accepted by God experience more negative states like depersonalization because of

cognitive inconsistencies and tensions. Vice versa depersonalization could generate a negative God image. The following process is assumed: individuals that experience depersonalization frequently have a distorted self image (Wolfradt, 2003). In turn the self image affects the God image (Murken, 1998). Therefore the self image could act as an important mediator and should be a point of discussion in further studies.

The God image takes also a moderated role: a positive God image decreases the relationship between importance of rituals and depersonalization. Thus a positive God image is a protective factor that reduces negative aspects of depersonalization. According to Schumaker (1995), dissociation during rituals leads to an immunization of believers regarding to inconsistent information. Individuals that believe in God and have at the same time a positive image of God probably show a decreased inconsistent belief and are not reliant on rituals and depersonalization. This result seems disappointing with the regard to dissociation and depersonalization as gates to religious, altered states of consciousness (Goethals, 1990). Are mystical experiences during rituals only possible if people have a negative God image? It is important to note that we measured in the present study by using the SDPE (Wolfradt, 2003) negative aspects of depersonalization. If a positive God image reduces the relationship between ritual and positive aspects of depersonalization must be proven with a different scale for depersonalization.

There are group differences to the effect that members of NRM and the Bahá'i religion perform more rituals but do not rate rituals more important than members of traditional churches. Frequently performance of rituals must not involve a higher importance of these. There are no group differences with respect to depersonalization. This is consistent with the result that depersonalization is only connected with the importance, not with the frequency of rituals. The absence of differences regarding to depersonalization is rooted in the absence of difference regarding to the importance of rituals. It is interesting that members of NRM and the Bahá'i religion quote a more positive God image than members of traditional churches. Indeed the former religious groups could facilitate a more positive God image with the result that the affiliation to NRM is considered to be a protective factor with respect to negative aspects of depersonalization as well. However there is also the possibility of social desirability statements.

Limitations

Critical to the relationship between ritual and depersonalization is the valence of the experience of depersonalization. Trueman (1984) verifies that depersonalization is negatively experienced. By contrast, Bucher (2007) and Goethals (1990) constitute the transcendence of self as a positive experience. It is to be proven if the finding of Trueman (1984) is generalizable to the performance of religious rituals. It is conceivable that the valence of depersonalization depends on the situation. In this context it is also important to note that the SDPE (Wolfradt, 2003) only measures negative aspects of depersonalization (see above). In further studies positive aspects of depersonalization should be collected as well.

Beyond this, the RRS (Maranell, 1974) shows problems. It is using the term "ritual" very often. Many participants reported that they define rituals as rigid, meaningless and negatively connoted. Hence the understanding of ritual in research does not agree with the common understanding. This could be the reason for a low mean and the right skewed distribution of the ritual data in the present study. For further research a new scale for ritual should be developed, which not only measures the frequency of prayers, but is also oriented to the current understanding of ritual and does not use the term "ritual".

The preliminary considerations to the transfer of Schumaker's theory (1995) to depersonalization are structured as follows: frequent ritual acts are associated with improved importance of rituals, which are associated with more experiences of depersonalization. This seems to be fruitless regarding the differences between certain denominations because there are no group differences referring to the importance of rituals and hence no differences in depersonalization. Like in the present study the ideological division from certain denominations to groups (traditional churches vs. NRM and Bahá'i) is methodologically doubtful. The approach of Dorahy and Lewis (2001) seems to be more fruitful: the authors categorize the groups in regard to their commitment to their denomination and therefore they found differences in the importance of rituals (also measured by the RRS; Maranell, 1974) as well as in the frequency of depersonalization. However, the generalisation of certain persons to faith communities is fundamentally questionable for the religious psychological research. Faith communities are not adapted completely by believers but rather refracted biographically. Petersen (1996) emphasizes that the relationship to God and the associated cognitions and emotions is very individual and shaped only slightly by religious communities. Differences *within* denominations are not less important than between denominations. In this way it seems to be more important for the psychological research on religion to build on individuals rather than on groups or to ask more exact about the relationship between the individual and the religious group.

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Table 1. Distribution of age and gender of the entire religious groups

denominations (N = 156)	mean age (SD)	women (n = 84)	men (n = 73)
Catholic (n = 25)	27.96 (6.79)	17	8
Protestant (n = 27)	29.19 (11.06)	16	11
Methodist (n = 16)	35.88 (9.90)	7	9
Adventist (n = 19)	38.05 (12.24)	6	13
Mormon (n = 24)	33.75 (17.97)	11	13
New Apostolic (n = 23)	40.35 (16.29)	12	11
Bahá'i (n = 22)	31.73 (11.01)	14	8

Table 2. Correlations between God image, ritual, and depersonalization.

	importance of rituals	frequency of prayers	frequency of church attendance	depersonalization
God image[1]	*ns.*	.52*** N = 123	.34*** N = 124	*ns.*
importance of rituals		.22** N = 154	*ns.*	.23** † N = 152
frequency of prayers			.42** N = 154	*ns.*
frequency of church attendance				*ns.*

Note. *ns.* not significant; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

† nonparametric Spearman correlation

[1] Scale after exclusion of unreliable items

Table 3. Mean differences on God image, ritual, and depersonalization between the religious groups

	religious groups		
(*N* = 156)	traditional churches (*n* = 68) M (SD)	non- traditional churches and Bahá'i (*n* = 88) M (SD)	*t*
God image	3.17 (.34)	3.38 (.29)	- 3.62***
frequency of prayers	8.91 (9.37)	22.30 (16.77)	- 5.83***
frequency of church attendance	63.03 (79.06)	102.97 (65.32)	- 3.44***
importance of rituals	1.59 (.78)	1.64 (.73)	*ns.*
depersonalization	1.73 (.53)	1.59 (.49)	*ns.*

Notes. *ns.* not significant; *** $p < .001$;

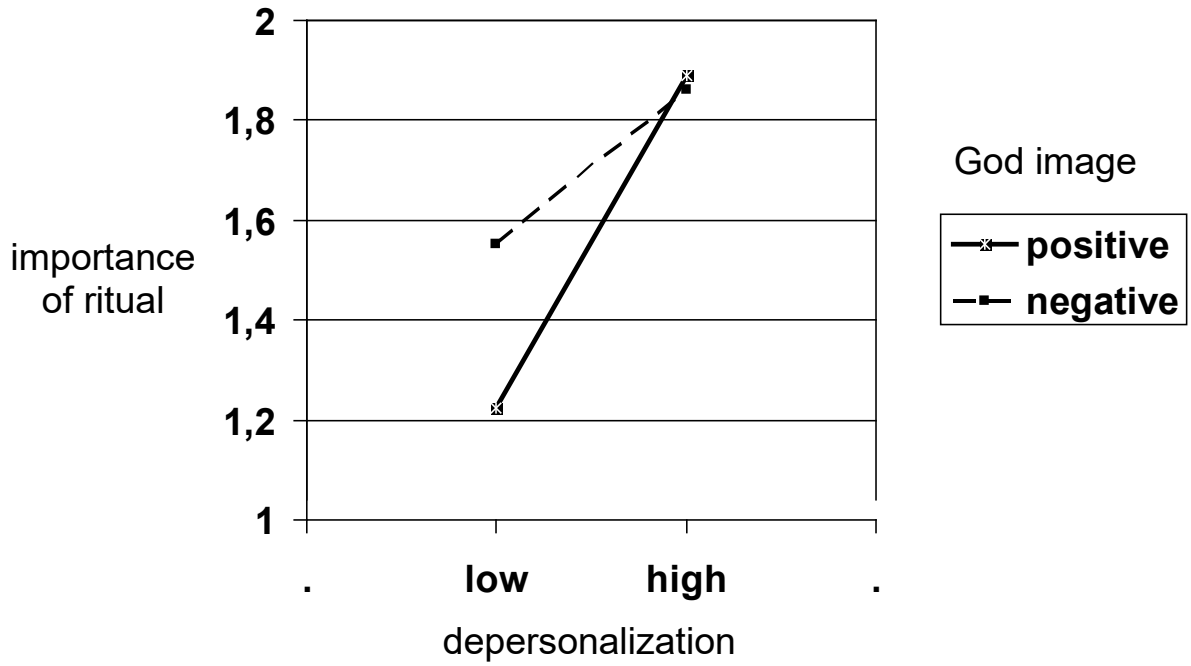

Figure 1. Moderator-effect of God image on the relationship between depersonalisation and importance of rituals