

## The image of God in adult children from dysfunctional families

### Obraz Boha u dospělých dětí z dysfunkčních rodin

Erika Vavreková<sup>1\*</sup>, Aneta K. Wiśniewska<sup>1</sup>, Stanisław Tokarski<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Institute of Psychology, Department of Christian Philosophy, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University*

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#### Abstract

In research that is carried out using H.G Gough's and A.B. Heilbrun Jr's *The Adjective Checklist* with modified instruction, we have reached confirmation of the occurrence of similarities between the image of the parents, self and the image of God, as assumed in object relations theory. A subject group of Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) of 32 women and 31 men was compared with a group without psychological burdens and analogous in age and number. We found evident difference in their self image and image of God: ACA women judge themselves more negatively as compared to the control group and their image of God is less similar to the image of their own father.

*Keywords:* self-image, image of parents, image of God, adult children from dysfunctional families, adult children of alcoholics, ACA

#### Abstrakt

Realizovaný výskum, pri ktorom sme použili tzv. adjektívny dotazník H. G. Goughovej a A. B. Heilbrunovej s pozmenenými inštrukciami, potvrdil výskyt podobností medzi obrazom rodičov, sebaobrazom a obrazom Boha, ako ho predpokladá vzťahová teória. Pozorovanú skupinu dospelých detí alkoholikov (DDA; Adult Children of Alcoholics, ACA), zloženú z 32 žien a 31 mužov, sme porovnali s rovnako početnou skupinou osôb bez psychologickéj záťaže v podobnom veku. Rozdiel v ich osobnom sebaobraze a v obraze Boha bol zjavný: ženy zo skupiny DDA vnímajú seba samé viac negatívne v porovnaní s druhou skupinou a ich obraz Boha sa menej podobá na obraz ich vlastného otca.

*Kľúčové slova:* sebaobraz, obraz rodičov, obraz Boha, dospelé deti z dysfunkčných rodin, dospelé deti alkoholikov, DDA (ACA)

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\*Korespondenční autor: Institute of Psychology, Department of Christian Philosophy, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Dewajtis 5, Warsaw, Poland  
e-mail: erika.elizabeta@gmail.com

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According to object relations theory, the foundation of self–image development as well as the image of God is provided by family relationships, in particular by early childhood bond with a caregiver (Gomez, 1997; McDargh, 1983; Rizzuto, 2012; Tokarski, 2011). Studies carried out so far (e.g. Clair, 1994; Johnson & Eastburg, 1992) seem to confirm this. The main ideas within this direction of thought are as follows: type of bond with parents offers the child experiences on which he builds its own self–perception; and a system of religious faith, in its center is the image of God, is an individual’s answer to his life experience. The purpose of this system is to protect the individual from life’s dangers and to help preserve an original model of the World and the learned ways of coping in difficult situations. A dysfunctional family is one that is unable to properly fulfill its role. Alcoholism of one parent engenders significant disruption in the actual fulfillment of roles and causes that children (Adult Children of Alcoholics, ACA) display evident difficulties in their psycho–social functioning as compared to their peers (Gołembowska, 2007; Johnson & Jakob, 1995; Stępień, 1991; Wolicki, 2006) Comparison of personality profiles of ACA obtained with MMPI at prototype groups (Tsirigotis & Gruszczyński, 2001) has shown that ACA display greatest similarity to alcohol addicts. Studies carried out by M. Ryś (2007) demonstrated that ACA do indeed possess lower self–esteem than people brought up in ‘correct’ families.

### Research

Based on literature, we decide to examine how the image of one’s own parents (mother and father separately) influence one’s self–image and the image of God. We assumed the relationship between the image of the parents, self–image and the image of God and also modifying influence of the addiction in family on these images. Our hypotheses were:

- H1: the correlation exists between the image of the parents, self–image and image of God in people from both groups (subjects and controls);
- H2: members of the ACA group exhibit more negative than positive traits in their self–image;
- H3: the image of God of ACA individuals, whose father was addicted, bears less resemblance to the image of the father compared to control group.

### *Methodology & Participants*

In our research we used *The Adjective Checklist* (ACL) by H.G. Gough and A.B. Heilbrun (1980). It is a tool for testing various personality traits. In the standard version, the subject selects from a list of three hundred adjectives those he feels that best describe him. The test scales were established on the assumption that people, who select different adjectives during the test, really differ in terms of their psychological functioning and behaviour. The test consists of thirty seven scales that are divided into five groups: Modus Operandi (containing four scales), needs scale (containing fifteen scales based on Murray’s concept), thematic scales (nine scales concerning various components of interpersonal behaviours), five scales of

transactional analysis and four scales concerning creativity and intelligence (Juros, Oleś, 1992) This work use the ACL test to examine the individual's image of the real Self, his image of the father/mother and his image of God. The test instructions were therefore altered. In the case of „real Self“, instructions remained as in the original version, while subsequent sets of adjectives were preceded by a note instructing the subject to describe their image of other persons. In the case of assessing the image of the mother, instruction was as per the original, with the exception of one sentence concerning the subject of the test: „which in your opinion best describes your mother“, (–cont.). In the case of assessing the image of the father, instruction was also as per the original, with the exception of the one altered sentence concerning the subject of the test: „which in your opinion best describes your father“, (–cont.). In the case of assessing the image of God, instruction was as before, also with the one altered sentence concerning the subject of the test: „which in your opinion best describes God“, (–cont.).

Research was carried out from 2007 to the beginning of 2010 covering adults aged 22 to 28 years with the average age being 25.1 years. Subjects were selected randomly from 250 people who 1) had come for consultation regarding the alcohol problems within their families and 2) had been diagnosed with the suggestion of taking up the therapy. They had come from Warsaw and surrounds. Thirty two sets of questionnaires completed by women and thirty one sets completed by men were then selected for statistical analysis. The control group of sixty three people, with an equivalent ratio of men and women, was selected randomly from 280 people of the same age bracket (average age 25.3 years), who had come for consultation regarding taking up employment and those who were found to have no significant psychological difficulties or diseases.

## Results

In order to verify the hypotheses the collected data were statistically analysed. In the selection of appropriate method we took into consideration the size of the sample and the number of trials. To define correlation we used Spearman's correlation coefficient (Rho) and for subject/subject comparison we used the U Mann–Whitney (Wilcoxon) Test.

### *Correlation of the image of the parents and self–image*

We posited the existence (H1) of correlation between the image of the parents and self–image (“real Self”) in two studied groups. The following statistically significant results were obtained from the subject group (Spearman's Rho: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ):

1. In group of women there exists a correlation between the image of the mother and the self–image within the following control scales (Modus operandi): No.Ckd (.69\*\*) i Unfav (.60\*\*); needs scales: Het (.69\*\*); topical: Fem (.54\*) and originality–intelligence A–3 (.53\*).

2. In group of men a correlation between the image of the mother and self-image exists in the following scales: No.Ckd (.65\*); needs scales Aff (.62\*) and Het (.66\*); topical: S–Cn (.71\*) and Mas (.64\*); transactional analysis: FC (.75,\*).
3. We did not detect significant correlation between the image of the father and self-image in women, however we did so in men: needs scale Nur (.63\*), Agg (.73\*) and Suc (.68\*); topical: S–Cn (.70\*), S–Cfd (.65\*) and Mas (.65\*) transactional analysis: CP (.81\*).

In the control group we noted statistically significant correlation between the image of the parents and self-image as follows:

1. Between the image of the mother and the real me in women, on the control scale No.Ckd (.88\*\*\*); needs scales: Int (–.55\*) topical: S–Cn (.50\*) and Mas (.53\*).
2. In men such a correlation was noted on the control scale No.Ckd (–.59\*); needs: Het (.80\*\*), i Def (.57\*) and topical: S–Cfd (–.59\*) i Mas (.80\*\*).
3. In the case of the relationship of the image of the father to the image of self we noted the following correlations in women: control scale No.Ckd (.76\*\*) and topical Mas (.76\*\*); while in men group: Unfav (.62\*), topical: Crs (.76\*\*) and P–Adj (.62\*).

Considering that the use of ACL offers possibilities of controlling many of the properties, it should be noted that few correlations between the studied images were noted. It also appears that these are a little more similar within the ACA group (their occurrences are more frequent) than in the control group, which also exhibited a few negative correlations.

#### *Correlation of the image of the parents and the image of God*

Our first hypothesis (H1) posited further that there exist correlations between the image of the parents and the image of God within the studied groups. Statistical analysis of the data indeed bears out the existence of such correlations:

1. Within women of the subject group these were noted in relation to the image of the mother: on the control scale No.Ckd (.69\*\*); in the needs scales: Dom (.54\*), End (.45\*) and originality–intelligence: A–1 (.52\*) and A–4 (.53\*); while in relation to the image of the father only in No.Ckd (.48\*).
2. Within men of this group a correlation occurred between the image of the mother and the image of God on the following scales: Np.Ckd (.89\*\*); needs: Int (.84\*\*), Nur (.78\*); topical: Mas (.71\*); while between the image of the father and the image of God on: No.Ckd (.77\*) and needs: Het (.65\*).
3. Within women controls the image of God correlates with the images of mother and father only on No.Ckd (.80\*\*\*; .83\*\*\*); while in men the image of mother correlates on No.Ckd (.64\*); needs: End (.71\*), Ord (.61\*), Aut (.55\*); topical: S–Cfd (.65\*), P–Adj (.59\*), MIs (.57\*) and transactional analysis: NP (.62\*); while the image of father correlates on No.Ckd (.61\*); MIs (–.58\*) and Np. (.61\*).

### *Relationship of the “real Self” and the image of God*

The hypothesis (H1) proposed also the existence of relationships between self–image and the image of God in the studied groups. These were as follows: statistically significant correlations between the image of “real Self” and the image of God exist in women: control scale No.Ckd (.79\*\*\*), and needs scales: Dom (.60\*\*), Suc (.46\*) and Aba (.54\*), while in topical scales in both men and women: S–Cn (.45\*; .74\*) and Mas (.51\*; .78\*).

### *Positive and negative traits in self–image*

We posited (H2) that ACA individuals would exhibit fewer positive traits and more negative traits in their self–image than controls. Verification of this hypothesis was carried out by comparing the Fav scale (number of positive adjectives) and Unfav (negative adjectives) selected by women and men of the studied groups. A statistically significant difference in the Unfav scale occurred only in women, as demonstrated by Table 1 below.

*Table 1: Comparison of Unfav scale levels in the image of real self.*

ACL test scales	Subject group		Control group		U	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Unfav – women	54.47	11.33	46.77	6.95	101.5	.013*
Unfav – men	54.81	13.40	48.64	11.99	52.5	.187

\* p < .05

### *Divergence of profiles of the image of God and the image of the father*

Our last hypothesis (H3) posited that in ACA individuals, whose father was addicted, the image of God resembles the image of the addicted parent less than it does in control group individuals. Results of the comparison of this divergence of profiles (D) of the image of God and the image of the father are demonstrated in Table 2 below.

*Table 2: Comparison of profile divergence factor (D), between the image of God and the image of father in both studied groups.*

D	Subject group		Control group		U	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Women	17.66	7.32	11.59	4.49	94	.012*
Men	16.20	9.03	11.19	5.19	45	.151

\* p < .05

A statistically significant difference was discovered only in the women group, where the divergence factor is higher than in control group women, suggesting that the image of God resembles the image of father less in ACA women than it does in control group women.

## Discussion

Proponents of object relations theory (listed at the beginning of this article) have noted the possible existence of correlations between the image of the parents, the image of God and self-image. Our results go some way towards confirming this, noting over fifty statistically significant correlations between these images in the studied individuals.

### *Correlation between the image of the parents and self-image*

Since a person usually grows in family we can suppose that a certain transfer from the image of the parents to the self-image is present, as posited by the first hypothesis. We found eleven correlations between the image of the mother and the real Self in our subjects. Our research also shows that ACA women consider themselves similar to their mothers in their contacts with men as well as in terms of their femininity which would suggest that if the mother engenders a feeling of trust in others, is open towards other people and cooperates with others then the daughter perceives herself similarly. The similarity occurs also in terms of openness, satisfaction with one's role in life, fearfulness and perpetual worry. Control group women, who consider their mothers as stable, hardworking, ambitious and firm but with little spontaneity, perceive themselves similarly. In contrast, the more they perceive their mothers as engaged and valuing intellectual matters, the more they see themselves as simple and uncomplicated.

ACA men search out and establish friendships, including those of erotic character, in a manner similar to their mothers. They probably compensate for the difficulty in contact with an addicted father, and in building their own identity based on father, by reaching to the mother as example. They display similarity to their mothers in having confidence in themselves as well as in spontaneous and carefree behaviours. In constructing their masculinity they draw in equal measure on both the mother and the father.

Control group men growing in correct families use the image of the mother to form such qualities as the need for heterosexual contacts, submission, self-confidence and masculinity in the image of "real Self". They do, however, tend to base these on qualities to those of the mother, which is not the case with men subjects where a large role is played by the particular functioning of the also addicted mother, forced, as it were, to take control over the family and thus providing a greater role model for any sons.

Correlations between the image of the father and the "real Self" occur only in ACA men. Perhaps ACA women manage to distance themselves sufficiently from the addicted father, thus not drawing too much on him as a role model in their own development. ACA men demonstrate a similarity in terms of the need to care and the expectation for support, but also in aggression. Scales characterise the individuals who like other people but seek their approval, since they do not feel sufficiently powerful to stand up to their difficulties alone, though the aggression scale also indicates that they treat others as rivals to be fought. Similarities in other scales suggest that if the father has self-confidence, knows his own value and value of his work and is able to control his behaviour, then the son will also display these tendencies.

Control group women draw on the father as an example of firmness and ambition while control group men follow the father's personal adaptation: attitude towards life, ambitions, drive and a readiness to reach for psychological counselling.

### *Correlation between the images of the parents and the image of God*

In comparing the image of the parents and the image of God we posited (H1) the existence of correlations between them. Data shows that correlations exist between the image of the mother and the image of God in both studied groups. ACA women exhibit a greater level of correlations than control group women. This would suggest that they draw more on the image of the mother in the constructing of their own image of God. ACA women perceive more the God as domineering if the mother was decisive and possessing a strong personality, or as helpless if the mother exhibited a lack of self-confidence and tended to back out of confrontations. The more they value a sense of duty and the adherence to rules, the more they perceive God as possessing similar traits. It is also the case with a propensity to play, giving in to desires or analytical thinking, internal discipline and drive towards set goals.

Our results allow us to conclude that the image of the mother influence the formation of the image of God in ACA women who also tend to base their image of God less on the image of the father. This is probably due to his addiction and, thus, being at odds with the culturally transmitted role of God, leading to the father's image not being interiorised. Control group subjects did not exhibit such correlations.

Control group men demonstrated more correlation of the image of the mother to the image of God than their counterparts. ACA men demonstrated a correlation between these images in two needs scales: Interception and Nurturance as well as the Masculine scale.

ACA men who perceived the mother as someone able to foresee difficult situations and cope with stress, as well as possessing rich inner life, liking other people, being able to easily connect with others and feeling compassion, had the image of God similar to the image of the mother and perceived God as positively disposed, understanding and compassionate (with high scores in those scales). In contrast, where results in these scales were low, God was seen as stern and demanding as well as mysterious, avoiding contact and inaccessible. Control group men, on the other hand, demonstrated greater correlation between the image of God and the image of mother: in the needs scales of Order and Autonomy; topical scales of Self-confidence, Personal Adjustment and Leadership as well as in Transactional Analysis (Nurturing Parent). It seems that in the constructing of their image of God men from families unencumbered with addiction are able to draw on the example of their mothers far more than their ACA counterparts.

Fewer statistically significant correlations were found in the relationship of the image of the father and the image of God. This suggests that the mother has greater influence on the formation of the image of God. ACA men demonstrated correlation between the image of the father and the image of God in the needs scale of Heterosexuality which signifies the gaining of satisfaction from interpersonal contact with members of the opposite sex. It seems that despite addiction of their parents, sons in those families seek role models for male characteristics, including those of God, in their relations with parents. Further, the image of

the father appears to take a minor role in the creation of the image of God in the ACA men than in the control group men. So, in a manner similar to the women, an addicted father is perceived as at least inappropriate role model in the formation of the image of God. Although some of God's characteristics are formed in control group men in opposition to those of the father (e.g. Leadership), there is a similarity between these two images in terms of Stability as well as valuing of tradition.

Our results appear to substantially confirm object relations theory in the context of the forming of the image of God instead of Freud's previous conviction that the image of God was formed on the basis of the image of the father – which was not observed within the control group women, though such correlation did occur at control group men. Numerous correlations between the image of God and the image of the mother became apparent, though these concerned mainly the men and not so much the women. The question remains of whether the process can take place somewhat differently in men and in women, with a preference for the opposite sex, as seems to be suggested by some previous research (Godin & Hallez, 1965.) It may be the case that daughters, by taking up a competitive position versus their mothers (in particular while growing up), do not necessarily carry their characteristics onto the image of God or reduce them as they grow older. Sons, on the other hand, continue to retain these much longer, perhaps reassigning the nurturing characteristics from the mother to God, while women tend to look for them elsewhere, and create their image of God inspired by other needs.

#### *Correlation of images of the Self and of God*

Assessment of the relationship of the real Self and the image of God (H1) in both of the studied groups has shown that, apart from ACA men, all of the individuals demonstrated a correlation between the number of adjectives selected to describe themselves and the image of God. In ACA women the correlation between these images exists in the needs scales: Dominance, Succorance and Abasement. If these women perceive God as domineering or being strong-willed and driven then they perceive themselves similarly. Completing this assessment are results in the Self-Control scale (a high score denotes conscientiousness and application to work at the cost of losing spontaneity) and Masculine (denoting the level of aspiration). A need for support from others (Succorance) and for Abasement tends to reflect a lack of ability to cope with difficult situations or crises. Women from ACA families usually have an acute need to be perceived as successful, while requiring support from others as they are not able to manage difficulties on their own. Constructing their image of God based on the demands that are placed upon them, they need support in difficult moments while displaying a tendency towards excessive self-debasement and self-blame.

ACA men demonstrated correlations between their self-image and the image of God in the Self-Control and Masculine scales. Characteristics represented by these scales could be called typically "male." It therefore seems that the particular circumstances of an ACA family create the conditions for these characteristics to be particularly desired or valued by the sons of addicted fathers, with corresponding projection on the image of God.



In the control group a correlation of the image of the real me and the image of God occurs in women in needs scale of Exhibition and Intelligence–Originality. A high score in the first of these denotes individuals who stubbornly attempt to draw attention to them and be the centre of attention as well as having a tendency to manipulate others while the second denotes individuals who are creative and intelligent while also anxious, frequently worried and not easily open in relationships. In men two negative correlations occur in the needs scales: Exhibition and Deference, suggesting a high degree of self-criticism, commensurate with an image of a dictatorial God. It seems that in these men their own self-image arises in confrontation to the image of God.

### *Comparison of self-image and the image of God between the studied groups*

Within the framework of the other hypotheses (H2, H3) we carried out an assessment of the differences between the studied groups according to the ACL scales test. Statistically significant differences occurred only in terms of the number of unfavourable adjectives (Unfav).

Furthermore, we carried out a comparison of the degree of divergence of profiles of the image of God and the image of the father between the two groups (H3). Our results suggest that a greater divergence between these profiles exists in ACA women than in control group women (no such occurrence was discovered in the men.) Control group women possess more characteristics similar to the image of the father in their image of God than their ACA counterparts, suggesting that they model the image of God according to their fathers to a lesser degree. It is very probable that people from families suffering from a parent's addiction form their image of God primarily according to the image of the "un-addicted" parent, in this case the mother.

Man's religiosity and the way in which the image of God is formed and developed brings up many questions and require further scientific research. We are often unaware of how many of our patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour we carry with us from our family. This is equally relevant in terms of our most important values and life concepts. Proponents of object relations theory, applying it to describe the development of the image of God, have suggested the existence of important correlations between the image of the parents and the building of the image of God and of the Self. Results of the above study go some way towards confirming this.

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