Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Newman University	

Unit of Assessment: UoA 4 Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience

Title of case study: God-complexity and the multiple God-aspects Framework

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2015 - October 2017

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
1.Dr Carissa A Sharp (PI) 2.Dr Karisha.George	1.Research Fellow and Associate Director of the Centre for Science, Knowledge, and Belief in Society 2.Research Associate, Centre for Science, Knowledge and Belief in Society	1.23 February 2015 to 07 December 2018 2.26 May 2015 to 7 December 2017

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2018

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Between February 2015 and October 2017, research at the interdisciplinary Centre for Science, Knowledge and Belief in Society at Newman University engaged audiences within and beyond academia in open-minded debate about how people conceive of the divine. This research has been leading to impacts on understandings of conceptions of God and relationships between this and wellbeing among participant groups, with a longer-term goal of helping to establish a new measurement that researchers and practitioners can use to assess God–complexity in research and clinical interventions.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Working with a colleague at the University of Oregon, the project team were sited within the Centre for Science, Knowledge and Belief in Society (CSKBS). CSKBS was a multidisciplinary team of academic research staff at Newman working on a sustained programme of research across the human sciences (psychology, religion, philosophy, and history) in relation to science and religion from 2015 to 2018. Later in 2018 much of the team relocated to the University of Birmingham.

The research was led by Carissa Sharp, a psychologist of religion, primarily focusing on people's perceptions of the relationship between science and religion and how individuals both conceive of and think about God. Dr Sharp's research focuses on the intersection of belief, identity, and intergroup relations across cultures. Her research addresses several interconnecting aspects of the psychology of religion using methodologies largely drawn from the wider field of social and experimental psychology.

Researchers have long acknowledged that people can hold multiple understandings of God simultaneously (e.g., Gibson, 2007; Rizzuto, 1979). However, there has been no measure of God-representations that assesses their structural complexity. The project therefore aimed to fill this gap in the literature and expand understandings of God-representations, helping to determine the extent to which the complexity of these representations is related to important variables such as well-being, depression, and attitudes and emotions towards God.

The purpose of the research was to examine empirically the cognitive structure of people's God representations, investigate God-complexity and the Multiple God-Aspects Framework (MGF), which are based on two strands of literature in social cognition: Self-complexity (Linville, 1987) and the Multiple Self-Aspects Framework (MSF; McConnell, 2011).

In Phase I of the research, the goal was to develop and validate the God-complexity measure. In order to do this a series of studies was completed developing and assessing the validity of the measure with Christian populations. Analysis of this data was completed and presented at SPSP 2016, BPS 2016, SSSR 2016, and SPSP 2017 and 2018, receiving positive feedback. Data collection was also completed with two Muslim focus groups and an online study of 6 different religious traditions (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Spiritual but not Religious) to explore the measure's utility in capturing non-Christian conceptualizations of God. Initial analysis of the Muslim focus group data suggested that the God-complexity measure would be easily adaptable to other monotheistic religious traditions; the research also started to explore the measure's applicability to non-monotheistic religious traditions.

In Phase II of the research, the goal was to investigate the extent to which God-complexity is protective against negative life events (independent of self-complexity) by using a longitudinal study. The longitudinal data collection was completed (86.1% retention rate), analyzed, and presented at IAPR 2017 and SSSR 2017. The analyses revealed links between God-complexity and well-being, and also indicated that the pathways through which God-complexity influences well-being differ based on participants' levels of stress.

In Phase III of the research, the goal was to assess the structure of God representations as measured by the Multiple G-Aspects Framework (MGF) by determining the extent to which the 5 principles of the Multiple Self-Aspects Framework (MSF; McConnell, 2011) are applicable.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

God-complexity and the multiple God-aspects Framework
John Templeton Foundation grant 52067:
[God-complexity and the Multiple God-Aspects Framework - John Templeton Foundation]

Davis, E. B., Granqvist, P., & Sharp, C. (2018). 'Theistic relational spirituality: Development, dynamics, health, and transformation', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality.* 6(1), 22–32. **DOI** https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000219

Sharp, Carissa & Davis, Edward & George, Karisha & Cuthbert, Andrew & Zahl, Bonnie & Davis, Don & Hook, Joshua & Aten, Jamie. (2019). 'Measures of God Representations: Theoretical Framework and Critical Review', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality.* **DOI** https://doi.org/10.1037/10.1037/rel0000257

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The enduring impacts of this research include expanding the empirical basis for God-complexity and the Multiple God-Aspects Framework (MGF) and providing the basis for practical applications (both in clinical practice and in religious communities).

The research was funded by the John Templeton Foundation with a grant of $231,217 for a project entitled 'God-complexity and the Multiple God-Aspects Framework'. See * in **Sources to corroborate the impact**.

The aim of the project was to develop a measure for evaluating the complexity with which people conceptualise God. This is of academic and public interest both in terms of the process and the outcome. Thus, the Impact is chiefly in the Area: 'Impacts on understanding, learning and participation', and specifically in these types: 'Enhanced cultural understanding of issues and phenomena; shaping or informing public attitudes and values'; 'Research has challenged conventional wisdom, stimulating debate among stakeholders.'

Outcomes of the research summarizing the Impact were to: 1) Fill a gap in understanding of God representations using established research from the field of social-cognition 2) Establish a new measurement that researchers and practitioners can use to assess God–complexity in research and clinical interventions 3) Increase knowledge of God-complexity and the MGF within and outside of the academic community 4) Generate new hypotheses and research projects for the study of God-complexity and the MGF.

These aspects of the psychological study of religion have wide-ranging implications including personal well-being, diversity/inclusion, and stereotyping/prejudice. In November 2015, Dr Sharp wrote a public-facing blog post about the project for the Science and Religion: Exploring the Spectrum (SRES) website. As of November 2017, the blog post had had 1,567 views, was the 10th most visited page on the SRES website, and was the number 1 most visited blog post. See ** in **Sources to corroborate the impact**.

Research shows that differences in the complexity with which individuals view themselves can have significant influences, and the project applied this work to understanding how individuals view God. The aim was to evaluate the extent to which individuals differ in the complexity with which they view God and to determine the impact of these differences on religiosity and well-being. The research associate for the project was Karisha George. Drs Sharp and George presented findings from the Time 1 longitudinal data at IAPR 2017 and SSSR 2017 symposia, followed by SPSP 2018. These presentations focused on the relationship of God-complexity to well-being, exploring different pathways that emerge for participants based on their levels of stress over 6 months.

Despite the fact that the research had not yet been published widely by the end of 2018, there is indication that the research was already influencing how people think about God representations. Project members received positive feedback from the researchers at the conferences at which they've presented findings, (for examples see *** in **Sources to corroborate the impact**) including questions about its application in various populations, including Clinical populations and the US Mormon population, which indicates that researchers may be interested in using the measure in their future research. Pilot research on the clinical applications of the God-complexity measure was also begun in collaboration with the Centre for Research and Innovation in Christian Mental Health Care in the Netherlands. The team conducted a pilot study with the Centre, using the God-complexity measure with a clinical population.

The impact is at an early stage as research is continued at the University of Birmingham by the Principal Investigator. The longer-term impact of the project is embedded in the future research and exploration of the assessment of God representations, which is continually being expanded and refined. The research has provided a useful catalogue of methodological tools for researchers and practitioners to utilize. Moreover, although there are many measures of God representations that have already been developed, there is still work to be done, both in further validating those scales as well as in exploring new, theoretically and psychometrically sound measures to enhance further researchers' ability to develop and test empirical research questions and practitioners' ability to treat clients in spiritual and emotional distress.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

* John Templeton Grant award https://www.templeton.org/grant/god-complexity-and-the-multiple-god-aspects-framework

** http://sciencereligionspectrum.org/blog-posts/god-complexity-conceptualising-the-divine

*** George, K., Sharp, C. & Cohen, A.B (2017). Exploring the impact of God complexity on spiritual struggles and well-being. Paper presentation at The International Association for the Psychology of Religion (IAPR) 2017, Hamar, Norway.
http://www.norway2017.iaprweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ProgramBook_IAPR_Hamar.pdf

*** George, K., Sharp, C. & Cheng, Z.H (2018). Exploring the Relationship between God-Complexity, Spiritual Struggles and Well-Being. Presentation at The Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) Annual Convention, Atlanta, Georgia
https://spsp.org/sites/default/files/2018%20Printed%20Program-web.pdf