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A Tangible Connection to the Divine: An Exploration of the Power and Utility of Prayer Objects

*Jennifer Valenti, Shira Gabriel and Anderson Blanton**

Abstract

All around the world, people use prayer objects to increase feelings of closeness to God. In this paper we examined the psychological mechanism by which prayer objects operate. One hundred and thirty-six religious participants completed a contagion priming procedure by reading a series of contagious, or control, vignettes. After the task, participants completed a scale assessing the appeal of prayer objects that varied in contact with God through prayer. Additionally, we assessed participant's trait-level contagion sensitivity at the end of the session. The data were analyzed three different ways to assess our hypotheses. The results indicated that people were more attracted to prayer objects that had been prayed on a lot, as compared to those that had never been prayed on. Additionally, a contagion prime increased interest in objects that had been prayed on a lot, but not other objects. Trait contagion sensitivity was positively associated with prayer objects that have been used many times, but not items that have never been used or other activities. In this study the hypothesis that prayer objects would take on the properties of God through psychological contagion was supported. This study provides an extension of the previous work by examining the role of prayer objects and the implications of their use utilizing psychological methodology. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for social connection, prayer, religion, health, and well-being.

Keywords

contagion – prayer – prayer objects – psychological contagion – religion

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Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God.

MOTHER TERESA

Traditional work on prayer has tended to view it as an intellectual endeavour. The focus of such work has therefore been on the mental processes of faith and communication with the divine, to the exclusion of any focus on the environment outside of the individual (Blanton, 2013a). However, across many different cultures, times, and religions, human beings have prayed while clutching, holding or wearing objects seen as influential to their faith and devotional process (Blanton, 2013b). The ubiquitous role of these objects (hereafter known as 'prayer objects') in so many different religions and across time and place suggests that they can play a key role in establishing and strengthening relationships with God. Through performances of devotional manipulation, prayer objects help to organize experiences of supernatural presence for the religious practitioner and help them to feel closer to the Divine (Blanton, 2013b). In the current research we examine the psychological processes behind the power of prayer objects. To our knowledge this is the first experimental examination of prayer objects. We suggest that prayer objects take on the qualia of God in the minds of practitioners through a process of psychological 'contagion', whereby after objects are in contact they forever maintain a psychological link to the practitioner (Frazer, 1890/1959). In other words, because religious practitioners commonly report feeling close to God during prayer, objects prayed with will feel as if they take on some God qualia and therefore become more sacred and useful to practitioners.

The concept of contagion was introduced by Mauss (1902/1972) and Frazer (1890/1959) as one of their 'laws of sympathetic magic', which were proposed to account for seemingly magical beliefs and practices in traditional cultures. Contagion was described by Frazer as the belief that once two objects are in contact, they always remain in contact (even when the actual physical contact has ceased). In other words, "things which have once been in contact with each other continue ever afterwards to act on each other" (p. 35). For example, a weapon used by a great warrior in battle will forever be seen as powerful, due to its past connection to greatness. Contagion is thus thought to occur when a neutral object comes in contact with something either holy or profane. In other words, contagion occurs when an object without a strong valence comes in contact with something that is either seen as very good or very bad. The neutral object then takes on the 'essence' of the good or bad object.

Although initially theorized in anthropology (Frazer, 1959; Mauss, 1972), the process of contagion has been examined in psychological experiments. In support of the theory, it has been found that clothing worn by loved ones is sometimes highly valued (Rozin, Miller, & Nemeroff, 1986). People are

averse to wearing clothes that have previously been worn by a disliked other (Rozin et al., 1986). College students do not want to wear a sweater owned by an individual infected with the AIDS virus, even after the sweater has been thoroughly cleaned (Rozin, Markwith, & McCauley, 1994). Objects are seen as more valuable when previously owned by celebrities (Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011). People are more likely to wear apparel related to their university on days after their school's football team had victories, as compared to losses (Cialdini et al., 1974). And people gain comfort from foods previously made by loved ones, as if the food itself has taken on the properties of the loved one (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). Thus, there is a great deal of experimental and correlational evidence from the psychological literature supporting the theory of contagion: once two objects come into contact a residual contact continues, at least in the minds of observers. The psychological literature also extends the initial theory by suggesting that physical contact is not required for contagion to occur. Rather association, such as with infection, misfortune, immorality, or unfamiliarity is enough to make an item unappealing to an individual (Rozin et al., 1994).

In the current paper, we hypothesize that the theory of contagion can be used to explain, at least in part, the importance of prayer objects in religious experience. A large part of prayer involves a feeling of connection and presence of God (Blanton, 2013a). When a religious individual holds a prayer object (e.g. a crucifix or prayer cloth) while praying, the presence of the qualia of God should spread to the prayer object. Thus we propose, based on the theory of contagion, that objects prayed with by the self and by others will come to feel as if they embody the qualia of God. Therefore, we hypothesize that the power of prayer objects in guiding religious experience and their attractiveness as prayer facilitators is caused, at least in part, by the process of psychological contagion. We believe contagion plays a key role in making prayer objects appealing. In other words, a perception that God or holiness 'leaks' onto an object when it is used, makes a well-used prayer object seem holier and thus more useful and appealing for prayer. The same way that shoes will get dirtier every time they are worn in the mud, a prayer object should become holier every time it is prayed with.

Although prayer objects do not come into direct contact with God the same way as, for example, a shirt would when worn by someone, many religious practitioners report feeling God's presence when praying with these prayer items. Furthermore, the process of praying involves a physical connection of the practitioner to the prayer object. Thus, we argue that during the process of praying, practitioners may come to feel as if some of the holiness from God becomes associated with the prayer object.

We utilized established techniques from the literature in order to examine the role of contagion processes in prayer objects. Contagion has been demonstrated in past literature in three different ways. First, researchers have

assumed that contagion is at play when an object becomes more appealing after it has come in contact with something desirable (or, less appealing after it has been exposed to something undesirable). For example, the finding that people are more interested in sweaters that have been worn by loved ones suggests that contagion is at play (Rozin et al., 1986). Second, some researchers have examined the effects of activating the concept of contagion via a priming manipulation. If contagion is related to liking an object or finding it more appealing, then priming contagion should increase attraction to that object. For example, activating the concept of contagion increased interest in objects formerly used by liked celebrities suggesting that contagion processes affect liking of those objects (Newman et al., 2011). Third, some researchers have measured trait-level contagion sensitivity (i.e. the degree to which people believe that contagion occurs) and looked to see whether that predicts liking of an object. If being high in contagion sensitivity predicts liking an object, then liking of the object is likely to be associated with contagion processes. For example, people high in contagion sensitivity become more interested in objects the more those objects have had contact with celebrities (Newman et al., 2011). Thus, three different methods have been used to establish the role of contagion processes. Although none of these techniques is perfect, converging evidence from all three should be strongly suggestive of the role of contagion.

To examine the role of contagion in the use of prayer objects, we designed a study to utilize all three of the traditional techniques. Participants were asked how interested they would be in praying with objects that had been previously used (or not); some participants were primed with the concept of contagion; and trait contagion sensitivity was measured. We predicted, first, that participants would be more attracted to prayer objects the more those objects had been prayed with; second, that priming the concept of contagion would increase interest in prayer objects that had been previously used in prayer; and, third, that trait levels of contagion sensitivity would predict interest in used prayer objects.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and thirty six undergraduate psychology students from the United States participated in our study for partial fulfillment of a research requirement. Students were invited to participate only if they indicated on a pre-test questionnaire that they were at least a little familiar with prayer and were religious. Participants varied in age from 18 to 22 ($M = 18.7$) and 61% were female.

Our participant sample was highly ethnically diverse with 39% of participants Asian, 33% Caucasian, 15% African-American and 6% Hispanic. We also had a great deal of religious diversity, with 30% Catholic, 14% Protestant, 16% other Christian, 11% Buddhist, 11% Muslim, 6% unidentified, 5% atheist, 3% Hindu; and 3% Jewish. None of the ethnicity or religion items moderated any effects, so they will not be discussed further.

Procedure

Participants were brought into the research laboratory and told that the experiment was interested in how beliefs were related to attitudes. We first primed thoughts of contagion by having half of the participants read vignettes that other researchers have found increase thoughts of contagion (Mishra, 2009; Newman et al., 2011). The other half acted as a control group and were exposed to vignettes that were unrelated to contagion. For example, one of the vignettes described someone reading a cartoon on a bulletin board and either being the only one who laughed (control) or laughing and then finding all the other people joining in (contagion). None of the primes mentioned religion or prayer; some were positive (laughing with friends), some were negative (spreading poison ivy), and some were neutral (smell of flowers in a bag). Additionally, the vignettes contained a variety of physical and psychological contagion. For example, the spreading of laughter is psychological, whereas spreading of poison ivy due to contact with a plant is a physical form of contagion. This was to account for both the physical and psychological forms of contagion that we believe are experienced when holding an object (physical) that has come into contact with God (psychological). After the prime, participants indicated how attractive various kinds of prayer activities were using a 7 item scale (from 1 'not at all appealing' to 7 'extremely appealing'). The items included praying without a prayer object, praying with objects that had never been used by anyone else (new), praying with objects that had been used once by another person, and praying with objects that had been used by many other people. Next, participants completed a series of individual difference measures (Attachment to God, Belief in a Just World, Religiosity, among others). These measures were included as potential moderators; however none of them moderated the effects, so they are not discussed further. Finally, we measured trait contagion sensitivity (Newman et al., 2011). The Trait Contagion Sensitivity Scale asks participants to indicate their agreement with a series of statements (e.g., 'Even if I were hungry, I would not drink a bowl of my favourite soup if it had been stirred by a used, but thoroughly washed, flyswatter') on 7 point scales (from 1 'strongly disagree' to 7 'strongly agree'). Agreement on these items indicates strong trait contagion sensitivity. None of the items mentioned prayer or religion.

Results

Recall from our hypothesis that prayer objects are attractive due to the process of psychological contagion, which led to three main hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 examined whether, regardless of prime, participants would be more attracted to prayer objects that had been prayed on a lot. This is because the more prayer objects had been prayed with in the past, the more opportunities there should have been for contagion. In other words, the more contact with prayer, the more the qualia of God should have 'leaked' onto the item. Hypothesis 2 investigated whether the contagion prime would increase interest in prayer objects that had been prayed on in the past but would not affect the attractiveness of objects that had never been used in prayer or engagement in prayer without objects. Hypothesis 3 examined whether trait levels of contagion sensitivity would predict interest in used prayer objects.

We examined our first hypothesis by running a within participants one way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on how interested participants were in praying with objects that varied in their contact with prayer experiences. We examined how interested religious participants were in praying with objects that had never been prayed with, had been prayed with once, and had been prayed with many times. As predicted, interest in praying with the objects differed based on how much the object had previously been prayed with $F(3, 405) = 58.46; p < .001$. Follow up contrast analyses suggested that every condition differed significantly from every other condition. In other words, praying with

TABLE 1 *Trait contagion sensitivity correlations*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Trait contagion sensitivity							
2. Never used	.19						
3. Used once	.24*	.69**					
4. Used many times	.31*	.81**	.82**				
5. Praying without an object	.16	.19	.05	.13			
6. Praying alone	-.14	.09	.07	.13	.46**		
7. Engaging in a leisure activity	-.11	.04	.11	.08	.08	.28*	
8. Spending time alone not praying	-.05	-.10	-.16	-.10	.07	.04	.32**

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

an object that had been prayed with once ($M = 4.21$) was more appealing than praying with an object that had never been prayed on ($M = 3.65$) ($t(135) = 3.86$, $p < .001$, $M = 0.47$, $SD = 1.43$, $d = .66$) and praying with an object that had been prayed on many times ($M = 4.46$) was more appealing than praying with an object that had been prayed with once ($t(135) = 2.43$, $p < .05$, $M = 0.25$, $SD = 1.18$, $d = .42$). In summary, consistent with the theory that the potency of a prayer object for facilitating religious experience is due, at least in part, to the process of psychological contagion, the more an object had been prayed with previously, the more participants expressed a desire to pray with the object. Specifically, when an object had never been prayed on the interest in this object was near the midpoint of the scale, suggesting a feeling of ambivalence or lack of concern for the object. However, objects that had been prayed with once increased above the midpoint. Additionally, objects that had been prayed with many times further increased above the midpoint. This suggests that when an item has been prayed with once or many times, people become interested in an item that would otherwise not be appealing.

Our second prediction was that the contagion prime would increase interest in prayer objects. A t -test revealed that, as predicted, participants who were primed with contagion were more interested in objects that had been prayed on a great deal ($M = 4.75$, $SD = .19$) as compared to participants who were not primed with contagion ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .22$) ($t(134) = 2.0$; $p < .05$; $d = .10$). Unexpectedly, contagion priming also tended (non-significantly) to increase interest in prayer objects that had never been used ($t(134) = 1.8$; $p = .07$; $d = .31$ ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.67$) and (to a lesser extent) in prayer objects that had been used only once ($t(134) = 1.2$; $p = .23$; $d = .21$ ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.68$). The trend for contagion priming to increase interest in any kind of prayer object and not just those that had been used a great deal led to a concern that contagion might be causing an increased interest in all prayer activities and may not be specific to prayer objects. To test that idea, we examined the effects of contagion priming on interest in praying in solitude, without prayer objects. Contagion priming did not affect interest in praying in solitude without prayer objects ($p > .70$). Thus, contagion priming increased interest in prayer objects (in particular those that had been prayed with a great deal), but did not affect desire to pray in general. In summary, consistent with our hypotheses, contagion priming increased interest in praying with prayer objects, but was unrelated to praying without such objects. This is consistent with our general hypothesis that prayer objects are important to the devotional process, at least in part, due to psychological contagion. Again, people responded close to the midpoint when reporting their desire for objects that have never been prayed with when they received the contagion manipulation. Therefore, the current work

suggests that contagion makes items that otherwise would not be very appealing, more appealing.

Our third prediction was that trait levels of contagion sensitivity would predict interest in used prayer objects. To examine this hypothesis, we examined the relationship between trait contagion sensitivity and interest in prayer objects among participants in the control group. We reasoned that participants who had been primed with contagion would not provide accurate readings of trait contagion sensitivity since they had been exposed to a contagion prime. Within participants in the control condition, we examined correlations between contagion sensitivity and interest in utilized and new prayer objects. We found that contagion sensitivity was not correlated with interest in new prayer objects ($r = .19; p = .13$), but was correlated with interest in prayer objects that were used once ($r = .24; p < .05$), and in interest in prayer objects that were used many times ($r = .31; p = .01$). Additionally, contagion was not associated with desire for solitary prayer without any prayer objects ($r = -.14; .25$). Thus, although contagion was not associated with all religious behaviours, it was associated with those involving prayer objects that have been used. In addition, the more the objects had been used, the stronger the association. Overall, the correlations are relatively small suggesting that contagion sensitivity is associated with desire for prayer objects that have been used, but contagion sensitivity and desire for these objects are two separate constructs. We also conducted a Fisher r - z transformation to examine the difference between correlations. There were no significant differences between interest in objects that have never been used and objects that were used once ($z = -0.33, p = .74$). There also were no significant differences between interest in objects that have been used once and used many times ($z = 0.40, p = .69$). However, there was a significant difference between solitary prayer, without prayer objects, and interest in objects that have been used many times ($z = -2.63, p < .01$) and interest in items used once ($z = -2.22, p < .05$). Additionally, there was a marginal difference between solitary prayer, without prayer objects, and interest in prayer objects that have never been used ($z = -1.90, p = .06$). Bivariate correlations of Trait Contagion Sensitivity are shown in Table 1.

Discussion

Prayer is the link that connects us to God.

A.B. SIMPSON

Prayer often involves a sense of closeness and communing with God or the Divine. The current research presented and found support for the novel

hypothesis that when people pray with an object, that object can come to attain some of the power and presence of God through the process of psychological contagion. In other words, when someone prays with an object, they feel closer to God due to the object's contact with God through prayer. Then, through psychological contagion, the object comes to psychologically contain the qualia of God. We examined our hypothesis, that prayer objects gain power via psychological contagion, in three ways. In all three ways, the data support our hypothesis that contagion is strongly related to interest in prayer objects. First, overall, participants were more attracted to prayer objects that had been prayed on a lot. In other words, the more opportunities there had been for contagion, the more attractive the prayer objects were. Second, priming contagion increased interest in prayer objects that had been prayed with in the past, but did not affect the attractiveness of objects that had never been used in prayer, or in prayer without objects. In other words, contagion was related to valuing objects that had been prayed on but there was no evidence for a relationship between contagion and prayer in general. Finally, trait levels of contagion sensitivity predicted interest in used prayer objects. In other words, the more participants believed in the power of contagion, the more they were interested in utilizing prayer objects that have previously been used when they prayed. In summary, objects become more attractive for prayer the more they are prayed with, and contagion sensitivity, both primed and trait levels, predicted an increased interest in prayer objects. Thus, the data were highly supportive of the role of contagion sensitivity in explaining the importance of prayer objects.

To our knowledge, ours is the first study examining this issue. Additionally, this study is the first to examine prayer object use utilizing experimental methodology. Thus, although the data are highly supportive of our hypothesis, they should be interpreted with caution and more work is necessary to establish firmly the role of contagion in interest in prayer objects. Nonetheless, the findings and their implications are intriguing. Specifically, this work provides a meaningful extension of the previous literature on the role of prayer objects in one's religious experience. Much of the previous work has been solely correlational or qualitative in nature. This work extends the literature by taking an experimental approach. Additionally, the current research provides a potential mechanism for why most religions utilize prayer objects in the devotional process.

This research also extends the previous literature on psychological contagion. This work is the first to examine psychological contagion three different ways within one study, looking at both trait and manipulated contagion sensitivity. Additionally, although contagion has been examined as a psychological and physical process, this is the first study to examine items that have both elements. Finally, this work has implications for health and well-being. If prayer

objects can provide individuals with a connection to God, then prayer objects may also provide feelings of belonging and buffer against threats to the self. Future research should examine this hypothesis.

Additionally, this work may be related to some of the previous literature on Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing). Cialdini and colleagues (1974) found that people were more likely to wear apparel affiliated with the university that they attend following a team victory, as compared to a loss. Psychological contagion may provide an interesting mechanism for these effects. Future research should examine these concepts.

The current work is also related to the literature on conditioning. One view is that valuing prayer objects occurs because the object is paired with one's feelings for the person associated with the object (i.e., God). However, previous work has suggested that mere associations of a liked individual with an object are not enough to drive one's value of the object (Newman et al., 2011). The authors in this study found that physical contact specifically was important for the valuing of objects touched by celebrities. Additionally, the more contact with the celebrity, the more value these objects held. Although physical contact is not possible with a deity like God, the individuals praying with these objects feel as though the objects are psychologically coming into contact with God when praying. Much like physical contact with liked individuals, the more contact with God, the more valuable these objects became.

Future work could examine other things, like places and prayer books as prayer objects and explore whether those places and objects operate through contagion as well. Correlational studies could examine whether religious organizations are better able to attract and keep practitioners when they have sanctuaries that are old and thus, via contagion, should be very holy. Future work could also examine backwards contagion. For example, do practitioners feel as if harming a prayer object is an affront to God due to backwards contagion? Additional work should also examine the perceived effectiveness of prayer items through contagion. Based on the current work, the more an item has been prayed with the more holy it becomes. Therefore, these items might be perceived as more effective due to their closeness to God.

In summary, the current work suggests that prayer can build on itself in usefulness, not only because people become more experienced in the process of praying but also because with each prayer experience, the setting in which they pray becomes holy. It also suggests why people may prefer praying in old churches, mosques, and temples, and why historical holy sites are both so revered and the issues of such controversy and fighting. The current work suggests an intriguing and generative interaction between the environment and the practitioner and provides a new lens thorough which to understand the

prayer experience. We very much hope and believe that this work can have lasting and important impact in the study of prayer and religion.

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