

God attributes and personal aspirations: When god representations and the ideal self converge

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BRINGING TOGETHER PSYCHOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THEORIES

Psychology recognises that people seek to acquire skills, traits and behaviours that reflect their ideal selves. These ideal selves can be motivational, particularly when discrepancies exist between one's actual self and one's ideal self. Loved ones can "recognize, affirm, and cultivate each other's ideal selves" (Drigotas et al., 1999, p. 321).



Christian theology offers a vision of an ideal self that is made in the image of God: the *imago Dei*. The *imago Dei* can act as "an ideal regulating personal and social conduct" (McFadyen, 1990, p.18) and a "vocation ... to which human beings are called, the fulfilment of which constitutes their true destiny" (Runyon, 1998, pp.18-19). Further, Jesus is an/the exemplary human being, who Christians are encouraged to become like: "Jesus is the pattern for humanity" (Balswick et al, 2016, p.43).

DRAWING ON THESE CROSS-DISCIPLINARY INSIGHTS TO ASK:

Do such theologies (and the god representations inherent in them) impact Christians' views of their ideal selves?

Is there a connection between Christians' god representations and their personal aspirations towards an ideal self?

THE "GOD ATTRIBUTES MEASURE": A ROBUST MEASURE OF GOD REPRESENTATIONS

We developed and refined the "God Attributes Measure" (GAM) scale, drawing on **formal Christian theology** about attributes of God (particularly Holmes, Bray, and Erickson), **psychology** (particularly Johnson et al's Authoritarian-Benevolent God Scale (in red), and **popular theology** (god representations from commonly sung worship songs). The initial GAM comprised 38 attributes of God, which we tested and refined in a pilot study of recently baptised NZ Baptist adults (n=17). Inductive and deductive coding, and thematic analysis of open-ended responses to questions about participants' ideal selves and god representations highlighted the importance of a desire to be self-giving and Christ-like (attributes not included in the initial GAM). We refined the GAM to a 10-attribute measure, further tested in the main study (n=123).

Figure 1: PILOT STUDY Qualitative Analysis (n=12 respondents to all relevant questions)
Number of matching ideal self aspirations and god representations

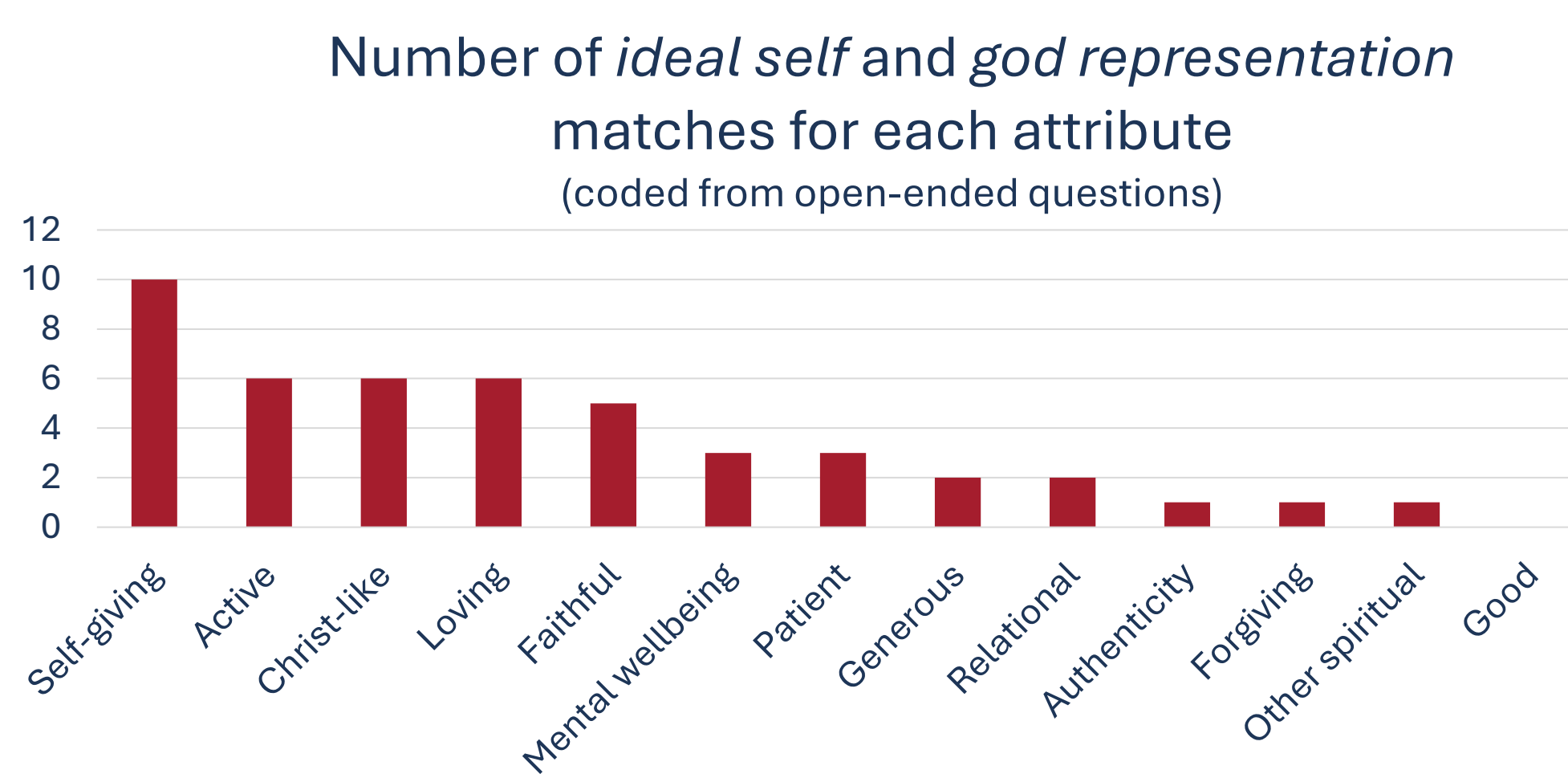
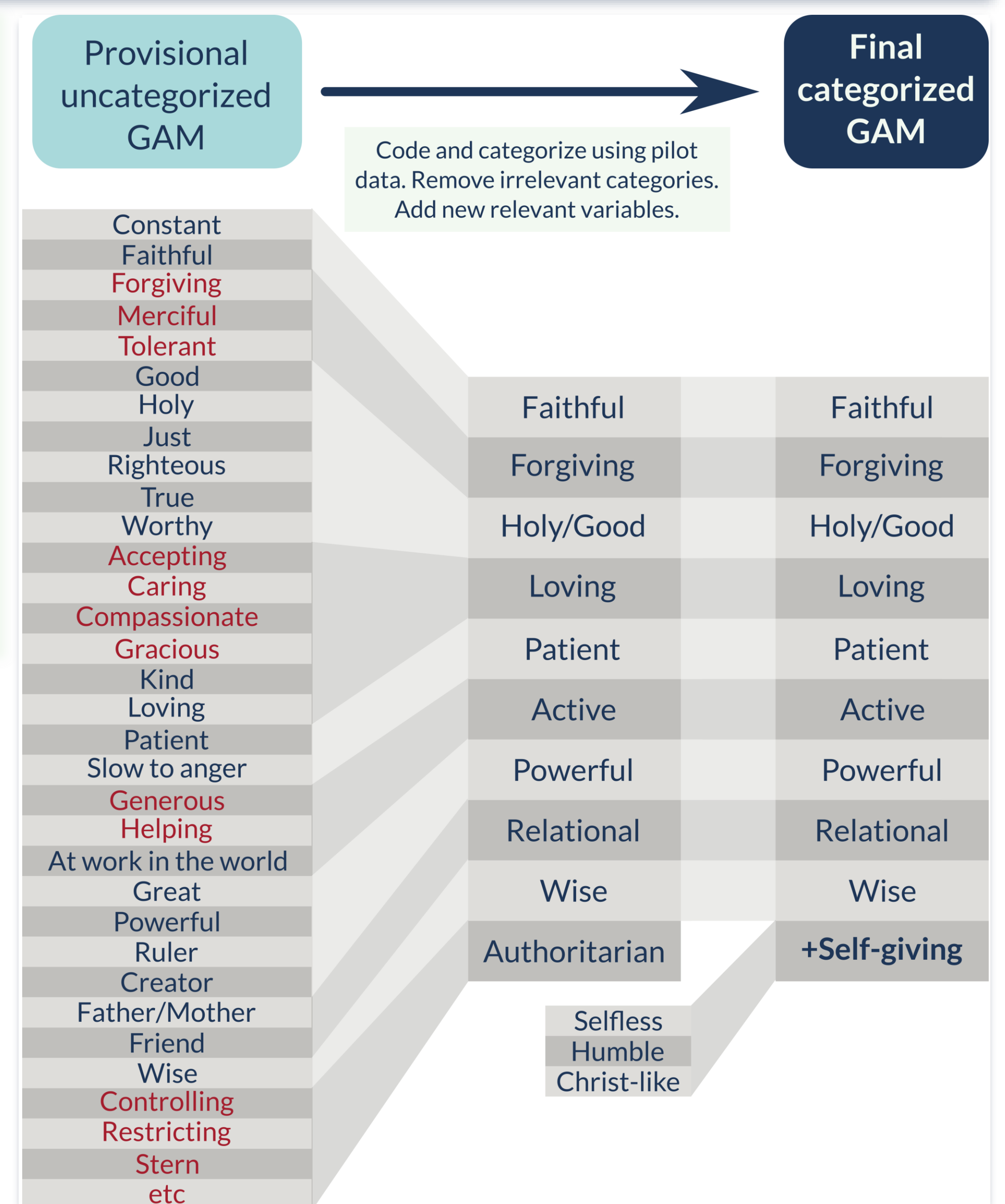
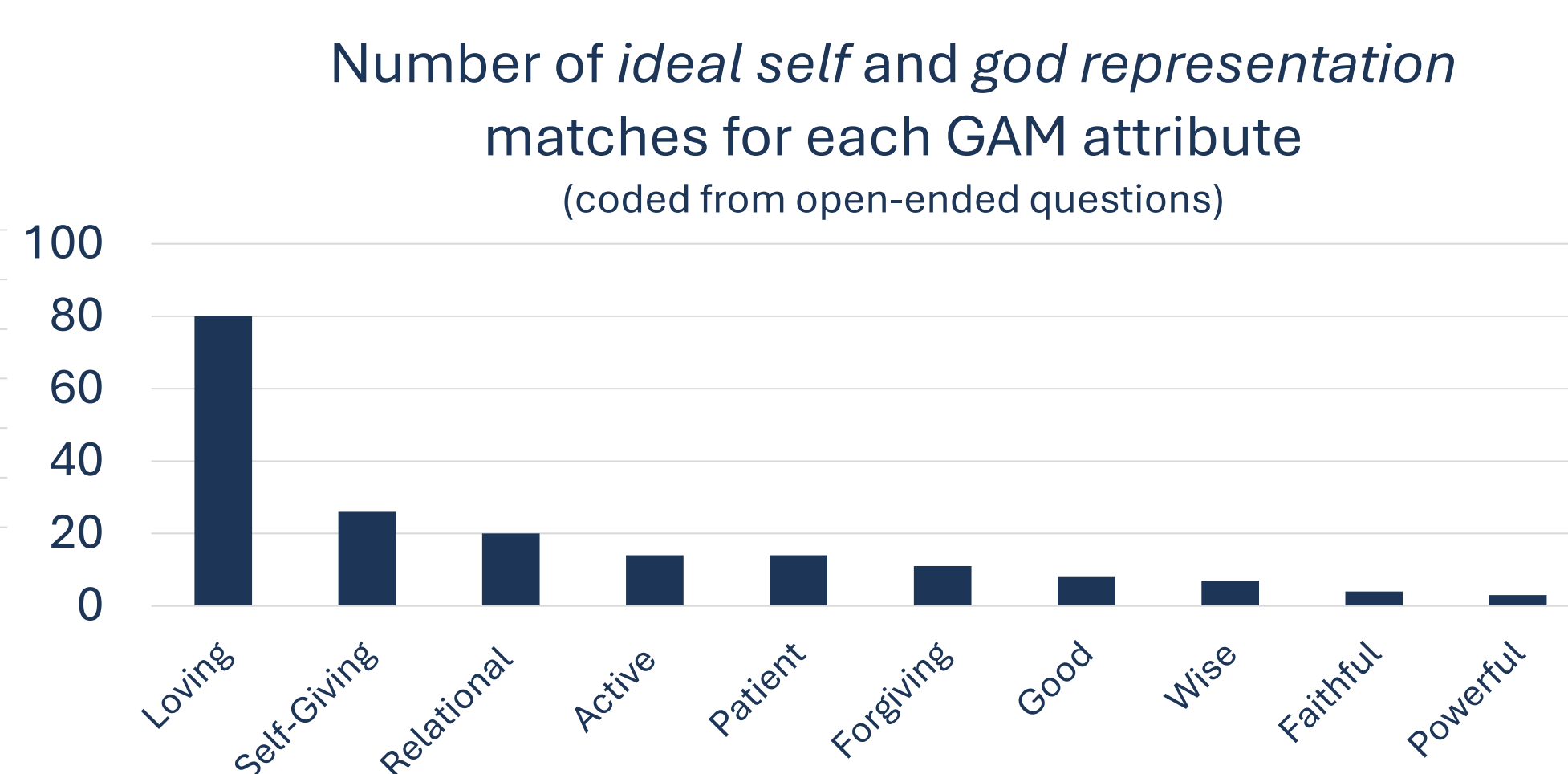


Figure 2: MAIN STUDY Qualitative Analysis (n=123)
Number of matching ideal self aspirations and god representations



PEOPLE ASPIRE TO ATTAIN THE ATTRIBUTES THEY APPRECIATE ABOUT GOD

People adopt a "true-self-as-guide" to measure their adherence to a shared cultural value of living a good life (Rivera et al.). For Christians, a theology of *imago Dei* can illuminate how agreed or emphasised attributes of God, including Jesus – the prototypical image of God (Colossians 1:15), might be viewed as this true-self. **Humans are made in the image of God, and seek to become towards a telos, best understood as Christ-likeness.** This provides for Christians an objective ideal self, conformed to Christ, yet (recognising diversity in Trinity) with room for each to be unique. The goal is "to become more like Christ as our unique selves" (Balswick et al. 2016, p.33). Differences in emphasised attributes exist as evidenced in the pilot study emphasis on self-giving (suggesting stage/strength of faith variation), but as one main study participant noted: "Love ... in the Christian faith is always self-giving."

When asked explicitly, 87.5% of participants agreed: "thinking about what God is like makes me want to be more like God."

Statistical analyses of the other questions confirmed there are significant correlations between god representations, and (1) ideal selves and (2) attribute self-discrepancy.

Table 1: Correlation between god representations and (1) ideal selves & (2) self-discrepancy. (1) Nonparametric Spearman's correlation: ranked god representations & ideal self. (2) Pearson correlations: god representations (rating extent to which each word describes God), and self-discrepancy (difference between how they perceive themselves to be and how they would like to be). (Colour intensity represents correlation strength; * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.001) (Attributes were listed in random order.)

		Faithful	Forgiving	Good	Loving	Patient	Active	Powerful	Relational	Self-giving	Wise
Correlation between ranking god representation (1-10) and ideal self (1-10)	Correlation Coefficient	0.431**	0.364**	0.544**	0.522**	0.375**	0.388**	0.088	0.513**	0.284**	0.43**
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.382	0.000	0.004	0.000
Correlation between rating god representation (1-100) and self discrepancy (1-100) (ideal self - actual self)	Pearson Correlation	-0.080	0.213*	0.112	0.240*	-0.166	-0.147	0.199	0.206*	0.208*	-0.013
	p	0.435	0.036	0.275	0.017	0.108	0.148	0.052	0.041	0.041	0.903

Reflecting on what God is like .. Makes me want to be more like God

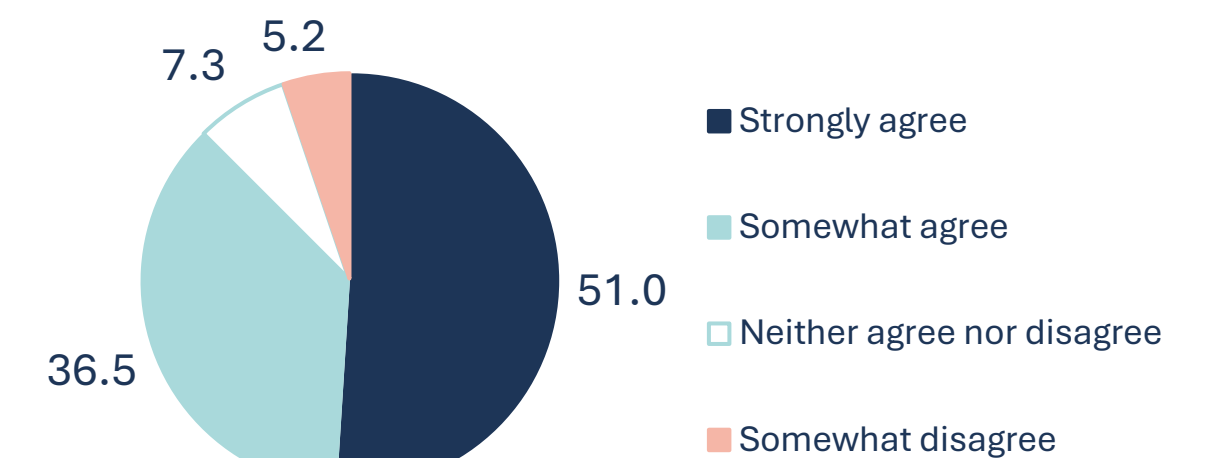


Figure 4: Participants explicitly want to be more like God (%)