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Blessings, strength, and guidance: Prayer frames in a hospital prayer book

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Abstract

Researchers in sociology, medicine, and religion ask whether prayer influences health, but pay little attention to the content or experience of personal prayer. This paper draws insights from cognitive studies of religion to ask what kinds of requests people make of God in their prayers, how they construct God in their prayers, and what kinds of responses they believe possible from God based on how they frame their prayers. We analyze the prayers patients, visitors, and staff wrote in a prayer book at the Johns Hopkins University Hospital between 1999 and 2005. Prayers are primarily written to thank God (21.8%), to make requests of God (28%), or to both thank and petition God (27.5%). The majority of prayer writers imagine a God who is accessible, listening, and a source of emotional and psychological support. Rather than focusing on specific discrete outcomes that could be falsified, writers tend to frame their prayers broadly in abstract psychological language that allows them to make multiple interpretations of the results

of their prayers.



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Wendy Cadge is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Brandeis University. Her research focuses on religion, immigration, medicine, sexuality, and pluralism in the United States. She is currently working on her second book, *Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine*, which she started as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Scholar in Health Policy Research at Harvard University.

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