

The power of prayer?

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Health and religion have always been intertwined, most obviously through prayer on behalf of the sick. Does intercessory prayer for sick people actually help heal them? For thousands of years some people have believed so. But new Brandeis University research in the *Journal of Religion* this month shows that over the last four decades, medical studies of intercessory prayer—the prayer of strangers at a distance—actually say more about the scientists conducting the studies than about the power of prayer to heal.

Intercessory prayer has been the subject of scientific study since at least the nineteenth century, when an English scientist, assuming that kings were prayed for more often than others, sought to find out whether those prayers were answered. He concluded that they were not, but that prayer might be a comfort to the people praying anyway.

After talking with physicians who wondered about the power of prayer to heal patients, Brandeis sociologist Wendy Cadge, an expert on the intersection of religion and medicine in contemporary American society, set out to research medical studies of intercessory prayer going back to 1965, the first year such studies were published in the English language medical literature.

"This analysis in the *Journal of Religion* is the first to trace the social history of intercessory prayer studies and to situate them in their medical and religious contexts," said Cadge, who this year is the Suzanne Young Murray Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. While there she is working on her forthcoming book, *Paging*

God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine.

Cadge evaluated eighteen published studies on intercessory prayer that were conducted between 1965 and 2006. Collectively, the studies provide a fascinating snapshot of changing American religious demographics, evolving ideas about the relationship between religion and medical science, and the development of the clinical trial as the gold standard of biomedical research, said Cadge.

"I do not know why physicians and scientists conducted these studies," said Cadge, "but personal religious beliefs appear to have played a role, along with curiosity."

The earliest studies undertaken in the sixties were based exclusively on Protestant prayers, while more recent studies, reflecting growing social awareness of other religions, combine Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and other prayers, Cadge discovered. Some studies suggested that prayer worked, while others said it didn't.

The researchers leading the studies applied clinical scientific methodologies to the study of intercessory prayer, but Cadge found that even that approach was fraught with problems. For example, researchers asked whether the people not being prayed for by the intercessors were truly a control group, since their family members were probably praying for them. Researchers also asked what the right "dosage" of prayer would be, how prayers should be offered, and what to do about non-Christian intercessors.

"With double blind [clinical trials](#), scientists tried their best to study something that may be beyond their best tools," said Cadge, "and reflects more about them and their assumptions than about whether prayer 'works.'"

Reflecting a recent shift toward delegitimizing studies of intercessory prayer, recent commentators in the medical literature concluded: "We do not need science to validate our spiritual beliefs, as we would never use faith to validate our scientific data."

Source: Brandeis University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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