
ATTACHMENT AND FAITH DEVELOPMENT

JONATHAN T. HART

Southern Nazarene University

ALICIA LIMKE

University of Central Oklahoma

PHILLIP R. BUDD

Southern Nazarene University

Recent research has shown the relationship between an attachment to caregivers and an attachment to God, an attachment to God and adult attachment, attachment to God and religiosity, and attachment and spiritual maturity, but has failed to examine the link between attachment and faith development (which includes not only the relational but also the imaginative nature in the questioning and answering process regarding philosophical notions of existence). The current project investigated the relationship between adult romantic attachment (cf. Brennan et al., 1998) and Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development in an undergraduate sample at a private, religious university ($N = 95$). Attachment anxiety (but not attachment avoidance) predicted faith development, such that the higher the attachment anxiety, the lower the stage of faith development.

Over the past few decades, research on attachment has investigated its development in infancy (Ainsworth, 1973; Ainsworth, Blehar, Walters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969), transition to adult romantic relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson, 1990), and predictiveness for other personality traits, such as emotional responses to life stress (Collins, 1996) and self-esteem and perceived confidence (Bylsma, Cozzarelli, & Sumer, 1997), as well as neuroticism, extraversion, locus of control, openness to experience, and Christian fundamentalism (Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997). More recently, researchers

have examined a relationship between attachment and issues of faith (Beck, 2006; McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy, 2005; TenElshof & Furrow, 2000), suggesting that attachment to caregivers is reenacted in an attachment to God. However, this new direction of research has not directly investigated the role of attachment in the development of faith. Moreover, the association between attachment and spirituality remains somewhat unclear.

Attachment

Throughout the past three decades, researchers have begun to explore how individual differences in attachment influence lives. At the conception of attachment theory, Bowlby (1973; 1977) sought an explanation of the evolutionary process that maintains proximity between infants and caregivers, even in the face of danger or threat. Bowlby (1969) was the first to present the idea that early caregiving experiences, that is, mothers noting and attending to an infant's signals of distress or fear, are internalized as working models in children. Expanding on these ideas, Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth, 1973; Ainsworth et al., 1978) developed the Strange Situation, a system for evaluating and classifying mother-infant dyads into different attachment categories. From this research, Ainsworth identified three types of attachment in infants: secure (in which infants were distressed upon mothers' departures but were comforted upon their returns), anxious-ambivalent (in which infants displayed obvious stress upon mothers' departures and return), and anxious-avoidant (in which infants were undisturbed by their mothers' departures and uninterested upon their returns). Later, Main and Solomon (1986, 1990) identified a fourth attachment classification: disorganized/disoriented (in which infants seemed confused and used both proximity seeking and avoidance behaviors).

These data were collected in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Jonathan T. Hart's project for the Master of Science degree. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alicia Limke, Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma, 100 N. University Drive, Edmond, OK 73034. E-mail: alimke@uco.edu.

Adult attachment. According to Bowlby (1969), attachment behavior and the influences of early attachment relationships are central to relational functioning throughout the lifespan. Because working models of childhood relationships are internalized, they lead to expectations and beliefs both about the self and about others in later relational contexts. With this in mind, Hazan and Shaver (1987) began the tradition of applying attachment theory to peer and romantic relationships in adulthood. Using the typologies corresponding to the Strange Situation (secure, avoidant, and anxious), the authors created three vignettes to describe adult versions of these styles. Later, in response to methodological and logistical issues, Simpson (1990; see also Collins & Read, 1990) developed a Likert-scale measure using each sentence from the Hazan and Shaver (1987) vignettes. Subsequent research found that the sentences revealed two dimensions of adult attachment: avoidant versus secure and anxious versus non-anxious (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) added a significant piece to the attachment puzzle by suggesting that both evaluations of the self and evaluations of others combine to determine adult attachment styles. They proposed a four-category model: secure (positive views of both the self and others), dismissing (a positive view of the self and a negative view of others), preoccupied (a negative view of the self and a positive view of others), and fearful (negative views of both the self and others). More recently, Brennan and colleagues (1998) developed a continuous measure based on this model, providing analysis of two attachment dimensions (avoidance and anxiety) as well as the four attachment categories.

Attachment and God. Interestingly, some researchers have begun to apply the model of attachment to individuals' relationship with God (e.g., Beck, 2006; Cassibba, Granqvist, Costantini, & Gatto, 2008; Cicirelli, 2004; Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Hall, 2007a, 2007b; Kirkpatrick, 1999). It is possible that individuals seek out a relationship with God to compensate for previously failed attachment bonds; however, as their relationships with God continue, these relationships more closely resemble the types of attachment relationships with which the individuals have previously encountered (Beck & McDonald, 2004; McDonald et al., 2005). The ability to create a secure base in

God provides the foundation to explore issues of faith and display tolerance to others with different religious views (Beck, 2006). Moreover, adult attachment predicts "spiritual maturity," in that securely attached individuals reported higher levels of "horizontal" (relationships with others) and "vertical" (relationships with a transcendent other) sensitivity in seminary students (TenElshof & Furrow, 2000). Overall, this research suggests that individuals with secure attachment have higher levels of spiritual maturity than individuals with insecure attachments, and that attachments to parents and romantic relationship partners resemble attachments to God (that is, at least with respect to the amount of attachment anxiety, but not attachment avoidance). However, no research exists investigating the relationship between attachment and the development of faith. Moreover, no research examines the direct link between types of insecure attachments and spirituality (i.e., previous research has only examined the presence of secure attachments themselves).

Faith Development

Over the past 25 years, Fowler (1981) has been one of the leading theorists concerning the development of faith. Fowler defined faith as the makeup of an individual's main motivation for life (Green & Hoffman, 1989). He emphasized not only the relational, but the imaginative nature in assessing the progress of faith development; that is, he discussed the intrapsychic process underlying image, ritual, and the philosophical notions of existence. Greatly influenced by psychological theorists such as Piaget (1928) and Erikson (1950), Fowler proposed six stages of faith (as well as a pre-stage to categorize the faith development of infants) and assumed that transition in faith development only moved forward (that is, there is no regression in this process).

Fowler (1981) believed that faith development was a universal human activity in which individuals find meaning. Most importantly, Fowler was more concerned with the structure of individuals' beliefs (i.e., way of knowing) rather than the content of the beliefs themselves. Fowler argued that faith includes cognitive, affective, and relational aspects. Movement from one stage to the next represents increased complexity and comprehensiveness in these structural aspects. Thus, to Fowler, faith development represented more than just spiritual maturity.

Current Study

Recent research has shown the relationship between an attachment to caregivers and an attachment to God (Cassibba et al., 2008; Granqvist et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2005), an attachment to God and adult attachment (Beck & McDonald, 2004), attachment to God and religiosity (Beck, 2006; Cicirelli, 2004), and a secure attachment and spiritual maturity (TenElshof & Furrow, 2000), but has failed to examine the link between attachment and faith development. Because Fowler (1981) believed that faith development involves structures used to investigate previously held beliefs about spirituality (pertaining to an underlying belief in an immaterial being) and religion (referring to the practice of sacred rites or observances), the relationship between attachment and faith development may be more complex than previous research in this area has suggested. However, it is also possible that faith development is simply an index of spiritual maturity (that is, higher levels of faith development represent greater spiritual maturity of the individual; cf. Parker, 2006). If so, attachment should predict faith development (such that secure attachment is associated with greater faith development).

Although a link between attachment and spiritual maturity has previously been documented (cf. TenElshof & Furrow, 2000), the specific type of insecure attachment that predicts a lack of spiritual maturity has not yet been identified. That is, it is possible that both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance predict a lack of spiritual maturity; however, it is also possible that only one contributor to insecure attachment accounts for the lack that has been previously documented (e.g., Beck & McDonald, 2004); that is, it is possible that only attachment anxiety is associated with a deficit in spiritual maturity.

In fact, Beck and McDonald (2004) have suggested that there is an association between attachment in romantic relationships and attachment to God for attachment anxiety, but not for attachment avoidance. This suggests that there may be differential effects of the relationship between romantic relationship attachment and faith development for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance as well. Thus, the current study investigated the link between romantic attachment anxiety, romantic attachment avoidance, and faith development in a sample of traditional undergraduate students. Because Beck and McDonald found an association between attachment

in romantic relationships and attachment to God for attachment anxiety (but not for attachment avoidance) and because faith development is likely to correlate with attachment to God, it was expected that attachment anxiety, but not attachment avoidance, would predict faith development.

Moreover, based on the conceptualization of attachment categories by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) as representing extremes on two attachment dimensions (model of self; model of other) and based on the findings of current research clarifying the research on attachment to God and spirituality (Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, Hill, & Delaney, 2009), it was expected that individuals classified as exhibiting secure attachments (positive view of self; positive view of others) and individuals with dismissing attachments (positive view of self; negative view of others) would report higher levels of faith development than would individuals classified as exhibiting preoccupied attachments (negative view of self; positive view of others) and fearful attachments (negative view of self; negative view of others) because of the high level of attachment anxiety involved in both preoccupied and fearful attachment styles. That is, because attachment anxiety (but not attachment avoidance) has previously been associated with attachment to God (cf. Beck & McDonald, 2004), and because high levels of attachment anxiety are present in individuals with preoccupied and fearful attachments (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and represent a negative view of self, it was expected that these two attachment classifications would exhibit the lowest levels of faith development.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and five undergraduate students at Southern Nazarene University volunteered to participate in a study described as "childhood experiences, relationships, and faith." The undergraduates were between the ages of 18 and 24 ($M = 20.00$, $SD = 1.46$). Of these 105 undergraduates, 10 were excluded due to the "traditional undergraduate" age limit of 25¹ or a failure to follow directions.

¹The university defines non-traditional undergraduate programs as programs requiring a minimum age of 25 years to enroll. In addition, classes in both non-traditional undergraduate and graduate programs at the university are held one night per week for the duration of the program (which typically lasts for two years), during which, students complete once course (or module) at a

Of the 95 participants remaining, 62.11% were male and 37.89% were female. Of the 95, 83.16% reported that they were White (non Hispanic), 6.32% were Black or African American, 3.16% were Native American or Alaskan Native, 4.21% were Hispanic or Latino/a, 1.05% were Asian, and 2.11% were self-categorized as "Other." These participants reported an average age of 20.01 ($SD = 1.46$). Of the 95 participants, 78.94% lived with either biological parents or adoptive parents until the age of 18; 13.68% lived with a biological mother only; 3.16% lived with a biological father only; 3.16% lived with a grandparent (or grandparents); and 1.05% lived with a biological parent and a stepparent.

Participants reported a variety of religious backgrounds. Of the 95 participants, 94.74% reported an affiliation with a Christian denomination (56.84% were Nazarene; 14.74% were Protestant-Evangelical; 11.56% were Baptist; 5.26% were Catholic; 1.05% were Pentecostal; 1.05% were Methodist; 1.05% were Lutheran; 1.05% were affiliated with Assemblies of God; 1.05% were Presbyterian; and 1.05% were Orthodox Christian). Of those remaining, 3.16% reported that they were non-religious; 1.05% were deist; and 1.05% did not report a religious affiliation. Participants reported an average of 17.30 ($SD = 18.72$) years associated with their current religious affiliations.

Materials

Attachment. Participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) as a measure of adult romantic attachment. It contains 36 questions measuring levels of attachment-related anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned," "I worry a lot about my relationships," and "I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them") and attachment-related avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down," "Just when my partner starts to get close to me I find myself pulling away," and "I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close"). Questions are rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). Scores reflect two continuous dimensions (attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance), in which lower scores reflect a more secure attachment and higher scores

reflect anxious or avoidant attachment, but can also be transformed into a categorical measure of attachment (i.e., either secure, fearful, preoccupied, or dismissing). Brennan and colleagues reported high internal consistency for the measure, .94 for avoidance and .91 for anxiety.

Faith development. The Faith Development Scale (FDS; Leak, Loucks, & Bowlin, 1999) was constructed as a measure of faith development correlating with stages 2 through 5 of Fowler's (1981) theory. Stages 1 (intuitive-projective) and 6 (universalizing) were excluded during the creation of the original measure due to the infrequency of encountering these stages in adults. The FDS contains eight semantic differentials for which participants must choose between a less developed and more developed response. That is, individuals must choose between two statements such as "the religious traditions and beliefs I grew up with are very important to me and do not need changing" and "the religious traditions and beliefs I grew up with have become less and less relevant to my current religious orientation." The FDS yields a range of faith development with the higher scores correlating to stages four or five and the lower scores to stages two or three. Leak and colleagues reported an internal consistency of .72 and a five week test-retest reliability rating of .96. Although Leak (2003, 2008) continues to support the validity of the measure, the FDS has been criticized by some that suggest it is not a direct representation of Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development; that is, it is merely a global measure of spiritual maturity (cf. Parker, 2006).

Demographic and background information. Participants also completed a demographic and background questionnaire assessing gender, age, ethnicity, religious background/affiliation, and information relationship to and dependency upon caregiver(s).

Procedure

Participants were approached and recruited for participation following a class period of one of their freshman-level general education courses during the final week of class. The researcher informed the students that they were participating in a project on childhood experiences, relationships, and faith. Students were asked to be honest, and to not worry about the perfect answer but to go with their first reaction to each question. They were given a packet of the target questionnaires as well as questionnaires not

time. Because we were interested in attachment, we targeted traditional undergraduate students (who had likely been separated from their original attachment figure) for as little time as possible.

included in this study that were randomly ordered and stapled together with a blank cover sheet.

RESULTS

A multiple regression was used to test the hypothesis that attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety predict faith development. Attachment anxiety and avoidance, as well as important demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and years associated with current religious affiliation), were included as predictors of faith development. The model was significant ($R^2 = 0.12$, $p = .003$); that is, attachment accounts for 12% of the overall variance in faith development. Specifically, attachment anxiety (but not attachment avoidance) predicted faith development, $\beta = -.35$, $t(89) = -3.46$, $p = .001$; thus, the higher the attachment anxiety, the lower the faith development. Neither attachment avoidance nor any of the demographic characteristics included predicted faith development.

Scoring of the ECR also resulted in the following attachment categories: 22.11% were secure, 27.37% were fearful, 30.53% were preoccupied, and 20.00% were dismissing. With these categories, a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance (followed by a Tukey HSD) was used to test differences in faith development between individuals categorized as secure ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.47$), fearful ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 2.53$), preoccupied ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.81$), and dismissing ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.95$). A significant difference was found, $F(3, 91) = 4.65$, $p = .005$, such that individuals with secure and dismissing attachments evidenced higher levels of faith development than individuals with preoccupied attachments. There were no other differences found.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study extend previous work suggesting that secure attachment reflects spiritual maturity (cf. TenElshof & Furrow, 2000). Specifically, the current study shows that attachment anxiety (but not attachment avoidance) predicts faith development. This is an interesting distinction, because it suggests that for faith to grow, individuals must see their attachment figures (and presumably God) with no fear of abandonment; that is, they must see themselves (not just others) as worthy of love and acceptance.

However, although we predicted that individuals categorized as exhibiting secure and dismissing attachments (i.e., a positive view of self) would

report greater faith development than would individuals categorized as exhibiting preoccupied and fearful attachments (i.e., a negative view of self), association between attachment category and faith development was more complex. That is, it seems that it is not merely a negative view of self that inhibits the development of faith. Instead, the combination of a negative view of self and a positive view of others may cause individuals to view themselves as unworthy of the desired process of spiritual exploration, whereas a negative view of both self and others may cause individuals to merely distrust this necessary question-and-answer process without preventing it completely.

The findings of this study add to a new yet growing body of literature on the association between attachment and faith. It is important to note that this study was not a measure of religiosity, but of the faith development of persons with a professed religious stance. In this study, attachment anxiety was a predictor of the development or maturity of a professed religious stance (cf. Fowler, 1981), rather than a predictor of how religious a person is. The lower levels of faith development are marked by concrete, literal thinking and general acceptance of understood authoritative stances, and typically involve a resistance or lack of initiative to question traditional or societal constructs. Higher levels involve self-reflection and often conflict with the status quo. In these levels, individuals possess more receptive attitudes towards new ideas or ways of conceptualizing issues and a desire to externalize their faith in a way that helps further others' faith development.

On considering the often condemning and close-minded stances of what would be considered fundamentalist Christianity, the study offers an explanation of individuals' tendencies to remain at these seemingly lower levels of faith development as opposed to moving forward to a more "liberal" or accepting mindset (see also LeVine, 2007). Attachment anxiety is theoretically the result of uncertainty, irregularity, and unpredictability in a caregiver (cf. Bowlby, 1988). Thus, individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety are typically insecure, dislike change, and seem untrusting (Grau & Doll, 2003). This study suggests that these individuals may also cling to traditionally accepted viewpoints, dislike the uncertainty of doubt or critical thinking, and react strongly to individuals introducing either of these two components (which are necessary for transition through an actively maturing faith; cf. Fowler, 1981).

With God playing the role of caregiver, “secure” believers should feel confident to “wander” into realms where they have not understood God to be before, knowing that God will be faithful to find them wherever they roam. They would be less concerned with establishing and defining the limits of God’s grace and judgment and perhaps more concerned with sharing God’s grace and withholding immediate judgment.

Future Directions

Although this study provides needed insight into the applications of attachment theory to faith development, it is not without limitations. It is possible that external validity of the study is limited; that is, the study included only college freshman at a private, Protestant Christian university. It is possible that religious upbringings (as well as the limited age range) limited the range of faith development in the sample. This study also did not account for other potentially important factors, such as self-esteem and attachment to God. Moreover, the causal connection between attachment and faith development (as well as the distinction between views of self and views of others) is merely speculative; that is, future research is needed to determine the exact nature of the difference in faith development among attachment classifications.

Future research should also investigate the link between attachment and faith development across the lifespan. It should also consider the relationship between spiritual maturity, attachment to God, faith development, and religiosity to determine how much these discussions represent the same underlying construct. Perhaps again, a scientific measurement cannot be applied to something as intangible as faith development. Streib (2005) emphasizes the necessity for the narrativity of faith. How would one’s narrative be scientifically measured? The idea of better understanding the fruitful spiritual lives of some and indifference of others to a spiritual realm should prove to be a fascinating yet contested area of research as information in this area of literature continues to grow.

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AUTHORS

HART, JONATHAN, T. *Address:* Graduate Programs in Counseling, Southern Nazarene University, 6729 NW 39th Expressway, Bethany, OK 73008. *Title:* Licensed professional counselor candidate. *Degree:* Doctoral student, counseling psychology, University of Oklahoma. *MS, Graduate Programs in Counseling, Southern Nazarene University. Areas of interest/specialization:* Roots and processes of faith development, particularly those related to parenting practices and other relationship formations.

LIMKE, ALICIA. *Address:* Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma, 100 N. University Drive, Edmond, OK 73034. *Email:* alimke@uco.edu. *Title:* Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma and Research Coordinator, Graduate Programs in Counseling, Southern Nazarene University. *Degree:* PhD & MS, University of Oklahoma. *Areas of interest/specialization:* Social/personality psychology, particularly self-concept and relationship processes.

BUDD, PHILLIP, R. *Address:* Graduate Programs in Counseling, Southern Nazarene University, 6729 NW 39th Expressway, Bethany, OK 73008. *Title:* Licensed psychologist and Director of the Graduate Programs in Counseling, Southern Nazarene University, and has been National Director for Crisis Counseling for Nazarene Disaster Response. *Degree:* MA, PsyD, Clinical Psychology, Biola University. *Areas of interest/specialization:* Trauma, forgiveness, integration of spirituality and counseling, compassion fatigue in professional caregivers, and Narcissistic Personality Disorders.

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