DIFFERENTIATED STYLES OF ATTACHMENT TO GOD AND VARYING RELIGIOUS COPING EFFORTS

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The Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) and Religious Coping Activities Scale (RCAS) were given to 159 church-going adults. A median split using AGI Avoidance and Anxiety scales divided participants into Secure (24.46%), Dismissing (20.14%), Preoccupied (25.18%), and Fearful (30.22%) styles. These four groups were analyzed in relation to the six scales of the RCAS. Results indicated that Secure and Preoccupied used more Christian activities and ideas in coping. Secure also scored higher on religious avoidance, turning to religion to avoid problems. Dismissing focused more on good works and also avoided any sense of pleading. Fearful showed greater anger and doubt toward God. The only scale that failed to show a difference was the scale which represents the notion of using the church and pastor as a means of support. One can see that religious adults have differing attachment styles and vary in their use of religion to cope with life experiences.

Attachment theory has become one of the most widely researched topics in psychology over the past several years as can be seen in the number of edited books devoted to the topic (e.g., Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Simpson & Rholes, 1998). Although Kirkpatrick (1999) warned of the danger in extending the construct beyond its original context, parent and child relationships, he and others (Beck, 2006; Beck & McDonald, 2004; Cicirelli, 2004) have used it in the context of religious functioning. The present research is concerned with the relationship between attachment to God and the use of religion as a means of coping with life.
as anxiety about exploring the surrounding world (Karen, 1998; Solomon & George, 1999).

The dismissing (insecure/avoidant) attachment is characterized by the individual’s expectancy that the parent or caregiver will be consistently unresponsive and unavailable. The individual usually attempts to become self-reliant and live independently without relying on others for love and support (Karen, 1998; Solomon & George, 1999).

Lastly, a fourth fearful attachment style, as described by Main and Solomon (1990), belongs to the individual who exhibits a disorganized/disoriented attachment to the parent or caregiver. There is a lack of coherence in the individual’s strategy toward attachment. It is as though the individual is fearful of the caregiver and is unable to determine how to approach the caregiver for comfort (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Solomon & George, 1999).

Ainsworth and Bowlby studied attachment in the early days of life, and more recent research has shown it to have utility in describing one’s relationship to God (Kirkpatrick, 1998, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Rather than attachment to an object present in a material sense, attachment here is symbolic. Symbolic attachment most accurately describes the relationship between the individual and the unseen caregiver. Attachment is directed toward a deity or other unseen entity (Cicirelli, 2004). The attachment to God can be considered an attachment just as real as an attachment to any physical or personal object. Even Darwin noted that “…the most usual argument for the existence of an intelligent God is drawn from the deep inward conviction and feelings which are experienced by most persons” (Gardner, 1999, p. 13). William James (1902) put these inner feelings into words in many places in his book, *The Variety of Religious Experiences*. The source of adult attachments can be considered the natural longing of human beings for God, or the source can be viewed as a projection of the attachment to early childhood caregivers. Both of these ideas are based on unproven assumptions, which is the way all human cognition begins. As Miner (2007) states, “We relate to others because we are capable of relating to God by being made in the image of God: we do not just develop an ability to relate to God because we relate to humanity, or to carers” (p. 119). Her sense of origin has as much justification as any other.

Another construct that has received attention in the psychology of religion literature is that of religious coping. How do persons use their religious ideas, beliefs, rituals, etc. in coping with life events? Coping refers to an active attempt by the person to find a secure base in the face of threat. Coping could actually be seen as an element in the motivation behind seeking attachment figures. Murphy (1974) delineated a sequence in childhood adaptation to threat, such as thunder. She saw the process moving from overt expressions of fear and helplessness, to seeking comfort from a supporting person, to internalizing the source of comfort, and then to the symbolization of the source of comfort and through reaction formation becoming a source of comfort to others. She is focusing on a positive outcome. From the attachment literature we know there are outcomes that are not positive (see Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Of course, the seeking of comfort from a supporting person and internalization of that person is the essence of attachment. The religious symbols could be seen as growing out of the original process with the displacement and projection of original objects (primary care giver) to that of God, the church, or other religious symbols. It is well documented in the literature that persons use these religious symbols to seek comfort when faced with life’s stress (e.g., Granqvist, 2005; Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 1990).

Coping then can be seen as a process related to the development of attachments, and coping can also be seen as an outgrowth of one’s attachment style. Belavich and Pargament (2002) have shown that attachment to God scores were predictive of spiritual coping and that spiritual coping was predictive of adjustment. One would expect that a secure attachment to God would lead to positive coping and better adaptation to a stressful situation.

Religious coping has been shown to play a large role in an individual’s mental and physical health and has been associated with the outcome of numerous challenging situations (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998). Because coping exists on many levels and individuals do not use only one type of coping activity, Pargament and his associates identified several patterns of religious coping. Positive coping methods tended to be related to secure relationships with God and a sense of spiritual connection with other persons. A negative coping pattern reflected a less secure relationship with God, an insecure and upsetting view of the world, and a religious conflict in finding purpose and meaning. This negative pattern was found to be associated with greater emotional distress, poorer quality of life, more psychological
symptoms, and indifference towards others. Of course positive and negative coping tend to be ends of a continuum with the majority of people somewhere in between.

The present research examined the question: How does religious coping vary as a function of attachment to God? Our prediction was that the more positive measures of coping, such as seeking the help of God and the church in order to cope, would be related to the secure attachment style. Negative coping methods, such as anger and alienation in regard to God and the church, would be related to the insecure attachment styles. More specifically, using a method of measuring attachment to God developed by Beck and McDonald (2004), we were able to sort our sample into groups manifesting Secure, Preoccupied, Dismissing, and Fearful attachment styles. The religious coping scale of Pargament et al. (1990) was used to measure six methods of religious coping. We expected to find those with Secure Attachment to use the more positive methods of coping (see below) and those with Fearful, Preoccupied, and Dismissing Attachment styles to use the more negative coping styles.

**Method**

**Participants**

Our sample was selected from various Protestant churches in southeast Texas from rural/small towns. The total number of participants was 159. The group had a mean age of $M = 50.47$ ($SD = 16.27$) ranging from 19 to 91. The mean education level was $15.16$ ($SD = 2.99$) years. The majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian American (96.9%), and fewer numbers identified themselves as African American (1.3%), Asian American (0.6%), and Native American (0.6%). Most of the participants identified themselves as Baptist (811%). We considered the group to be highly religious since 98% attended religious services weekly and 94% prayed more than once a day.

**Materials**

After informed consent, a biographical questionnaire, the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) (Beck & McDonald, 2004), and the Religious Coping Activities Scale (RCAS) (Pargament et al., 1990) were administered to the participants.

The AGI is a scale developed by Beck and McDonald based on the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) measure (Brennan et al., 1998). The two tests, AGI and ECR, relate to attachment theory and the varying types of attachments persons develop with parents, spouse, God, and others. The AGI consists of 28 statements to which participants are asked to respond using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (7). Two 14-item subscales are derived from the measure that indicate attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. From Beck and McDonald’s research, both factors demonstrate good internal consistency (Chronbach’s alphas Anxiety .87 and Avoidance .86). The avoidance and anxiety dimensions are similar to those in the ECR. In our research Chronbach’s alpha for the Anxiety subscale was .89 and for the Avoidance subscale, .82.

For the Attachment to God Inventory, the avoidance subscale includes “need for self-reliance, a difficulty with depending upon God, and unwillingness to be emotionally intimate with God” (Beck & McDonald, 2004, p. 94). The Anxiety subscale includes “fear of potential abandonment by God, angry protest ..., jealousy over God’s seemingly differential intimacy with others, anxiety over one’s lovability in God’s eyes, and finally, preoccupation with or worry concerning one’s relationship with God” (p. 94).

The RCAS is a measure of religious coping; it is a 29-item scale that deals with the extent to which people use religion as a means of coping with stressful life circumstances. We chose to use the RCAS for several reasons. We had used the Ways of Religious Coping Scale (WORCS) (Boudreaux, Catz, Ryan, Amaral-Melendez, & Brantley, 1995) in previous research (Bruce, Menefee, Kordinak, & Harman, 2005) and were looking for an instrument that measured a broader array of religious coping dimensions. We found several; however, the RCOPE instrument was too long and involved for our purpose. The Brief Cope was similar in length and question content to the RCAS, yet the RCAS seemed more obviously Christian having the words Jesus and Christ in several of the questions. Our sample was definitely a Christian group, and the RCAS seemed most appropriate. The Participants responded on a four point Likert-type scale with one being *this statement captures my feelings* “Not at all,” two being “Somewhat,” three “Quite a bit” and four “A great deal.” The RCAS contains six subscales described below.

The Spiritually Based Activities (SBA) subscale measures an individual’s reliance on a loving relation-
ship with God. Items such as “Used Christ as an example of how I should live” were contained in this scale (12 items). The Good Deeds (GD) subscale indicates the extent to which persons cope with life’s stress by using good actions toward others. Items such as “Provided help to other church members” are contained in this scale (6 items).

The Discontent (D) subscale measures an angry and alienated reaction to God and to the church. “Felt angry with or distant from God” is an example of an item in this scale (3 items). Interpersonal Religious Support (IRS) is indicative of leaning on clergy, church members, and others for help. “Received support from the clergy” is an example (2 items). The Plead (P) subscale operationalizes tendencies to question and bargain with God in hopes of obtaining a miraculous solution to personal problems, a pleading approach to seeking God’s help. “Bargained with God to make things better” is an example (3 items).

And finally, Religious Avoidance (RA) measures a religiously based attempt to divert attention away from stressful circumstances. The person refocuses attention on something other than the problem. “Prayed or read the Bible to keep my mind off my problems” is an example (3 items). Internal reliability for all six subscales appears adequate for use. Cronbach’s alphas were described as ranging from low to moderately high by Pargament and his colleagues: SBA .92, GD .82, D .68, IRS .78, P .61, and RA .61. They also reported that validity for the scale proved to be very good, with unique variance that was explained by each of the individual subscales. From our participants, the Chronbach alphas were as follows: SBA .86, GD .84, D .72, IRS .85, P .59, and RA .70.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from church class settings (such as Sunday school or other religious instruction classes and/or meetings). Among the items included in the survey packet were a cover letter describing the general purpose of the research, informed consent document, biographical data questionnaire, the Attachment to God Inventory (Beck & McDonald, 2004), and the Religious Coping Activities Scale (Pargament et al., 1990). Some of the participants completed the packet of forms in the setting of administration, and others were allowed to take them home and return them the following week. The total packet of forms took approximately 45 minutes to complete.

Results

Using a median split on the Avoidance and Anxiety scales of the AGI, participants were divided into Secure Attachment, Dismissing or Avoidant Attachment, Preoccupied or Anxious Attachment, and Fearful Attachment. We were following the lead of Brennan, et al. (1998) in the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) measure. Although they used a more sophisticated method of deriving the four groups, essentially they noted that Securely attached persons scored low on both the Avoidant and Anxiety scales, Dismissing styles were high on Avoidance and low on Anxiety, Preoccupied styles were high on Anxiety and low on Avoidance, and Fearful Attachment style high on both Avoidance and Anxiety. Defining low and high as below or above the median, we created our four groups. The less sophisticated median split with the AGI may have resulted in a lower level of power in the analyses; nevertheless, it is similar to the ECR approach where the means are used along with regression equations. Our results using this method found 26.17% of our sample to be Securely attached, 20.13% to have a Dismissing style, 24.16% to be Preoccupied, and 29.53% to have a Fearful Attachment style.

The four attachment groups indicated above served as the independent measures and were analyzed in relation to the six subscales of the RCAS, Spiritually Based Activities (SBA), Good Deeds (GD), Discontent (D), Interpersonal Religious Support (IRS), Plead (P), and Religious Avoidance (RA). A separate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed for each of the scales with alpha set at .01 since several tests were conducted. Separate ANOVAs, rather than multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA), were used due to the inter-correlations among the five dependent variables ranging from -.003 to .532, since those below .3 violated MANOVA assumptions (Maxwell, 2001). Thus, alpha was set across the analyses at .01 to be more conservative and to decrease the likelihood of making Type I errors. Homogeneity of variance was determined for each of the ANOVAs by using Tukey HSD; none of the variances reached a level of significant difference. There were 149 individuals who completed all the tests required for the reported analyses. Table 1 displays the attachment styles and RCAS scores.

On the SBA scale, there was a significant difference between the four groups ($F (3, 145) = 12.99, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .21$). A Tukey test was performed on the differ-
ences revealing that the Secure Attachment Group was significantly higher on this measure as compared to Dismissing and Fearful groups. The Preoccupied and Fearful groups were significantly different with the Preoccupied group scoring higher. The other differences did not reach statistical significance. We noted that the Fearful group had the lowest score for this scale and the Secure group the highest (see Table 1).

On the GD scale there was also a significant difference between the groups ($F(3, 145) = 6.05, p < .001, \eta^2_{p} = .11$). The Tukey analysis revealed that the Dismissing group was significantly lower in this measure than the Secure and Preoccupied groups, but none of the other differences were significant (Table 1). The D scale also showed a significant effect ($F(3, 145) = 6.61, p < .001, \eta^2_{p} = .12$). Only the Fearful and the Secure group differences reached significance on the Tukey test (Table 1).

The IRS scale score differences did not reach the level of significance set for the research ($F(3, 145) = 2.74, p = .05, \eta^2_{p} = .05$). The groups did not differ in their appeal to the church or clergy in times of stressful life events (Table 1). The P scale scores were significantly different ($F(3, 145) = 11.97, p < .001, \eta^2_{p} = .20$) with the Tukey analysis revealing that the Dismissing group was significantly lower than all others; the other groups did not differ significantly (Table 1).

The RA scale scores were significantly different ($F(3, 145) = 11.24, p < .001, \eta^2_{p} = .19$) with the Tukey test revealing that the Secure group was significantly higher than the Fearful and Dismissing groups (Table 1). None of the other differences reached the set standard of statistical significance.

Effect size is an important element of statistical analyses. The $\eta^2_{p}$ scores, strength of effect, in all of the comparisons above were rather small. In drawing conclusions from this research the size of the effect should be considered.

**DISCUSSION**

How does religious coping vary as a function of attachment to God? A first point to note is that from the results it appears styles of attachment to God, when compared to attachment relationships between

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**TABLE 1**

*Attachment Styles and Scale Scores from the RCAS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SBA</th>
<th>GD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>IRS</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>RA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43.23</td>
<td>19.38</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>6.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 39</td>
<td>(26.17%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36.60</td>
<td>15.80</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 30</td>
<td>(20.13%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40.39</td>
<td>19.72</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>7.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 36</td>
<td>(24.16%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35.68</td>
<td>18.23</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>7.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 44</td>
<td>(29.53%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance levels—alpha < .01, revealed following significant differences:

- For Spiritually Based Activities (SBA) scores, Secure greater than Dismissing and Fearful, Preoccupied greater than Fearful
- For Good Deeds (GD) scores, Dismissing greater than Preoccupied
- For Discontent (D) scores Fearful greater than Secure
- For Interpersonal Religious Support (IRS) scores no significant differences
- For Pleading (P) scores Dismissing less than all other groups
- For Religious Avoidance (RA) scores Secure greater than Dismissing and Fearful
adult human beings, are quite different. Webster (1998), summarizing results on attachment styles for young adult close relations, indicated that the usual percentages were about 56% secure, 25% avoidant, and 19% anxious/ambivalent, very similar to that found in young children. Brennan et al. (1998) noted that the percentage of young adults scoring as securely attached varied between 45 and 65. With the AGI we found only 26.17 percent to be securely attached. Although the AGI and ECR instruments are similar in design, the object of the attachment is quite different. For example a statement on the ECR, “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down,” becomes, “I prefer not to depend too much on God.” With human relationships the object is more concrete and less symbolic. The relationship with God is much more abstract. The fact, however, that this difference in distribution does occur is worthy of note and should be interpreted with caution due to the differences in the conceptual framework as well as the method of measurement. Bowlby (1988) presented attachment as a human factor that was rather stable over time; however, more recent research on attachment stability has raised questions about this assumption (Thompson, 1999) and other recent research has provided partial support for stability (Benson, McWey, & Ross, 2006). So the stability framework for the attachment construct is still emerging. If attachment styles are more fluid in the realm of interpersonal relations, would one expect attachment to God to be more or less stable/fluid? This would seem an appropriate question to research in the future.

The present research found that persons varying in attachment to God used religion as a method of coping in differing ways. Securely attached persons tend to view God as a source of strength for coping with life’s difficulties, using positive spiritually-based coping methods. They were apt to employ good deeds as a means of coping. They were less discontent as compared to some of the other groups, and in times of distress they were more apt to displace their thoughts toward religious notions and activities rather than focus on troubling ideas. One might surmise from these scores that persons with a Secure style were less apt to blame God or others for their problems particularly as compared to the Fearful group. The refocusing of attention away from the problem is more difficult for the Fearful and the Avoidant groups.

It should be noted that although scores from Pargament et al. (1990) and the Beck and McDonald (2004) scales both use the term avoidance, they are not measuring the same construct, since the correlation between the two was -.43. Pargament’s Religious Avoidance score focuses on the use of religious ideas rather than focusing on the problems, while Beck and McDonald’s Avoidance measure is concerned with the fear of over familiarity with God.

An examination of the lower Pleading and Religious Avoidance scores, might lead one to conclude that the Dismissing style was more apt to face problems forthrightly and not plead with God or anyone else for help. They appeared to be self-reliant and to consider the problems with which they were faced as their responsibility. This would seem to indicate that the Dismissing group was less likely to do something religious as compared to the Preoccupied and Secure groups who perhaps were more apt to take an active approach within their religious understanding of life. Perhaps Dismissing styled persons are simply not inclined to beg for help. “The world is this way,” they might think; “Get over it!” Perhaps this group is more stoic-like in its approach to life and to God.

The Preoccupied style seemed closest to the Secure style. The two styles did not differ significantly in the six scales, and in looking at the scores in Table 1, they appeared quite similar. In the attachment literature on childhood and later, the Preoccupied individual engages in reassurance-seeking, clinging, jealous, and smothering with the attachment figure or significant other (e.g., Slade, 1999; Wearden, Perryman, & Ward, 2006). This may mark a real difference between attachment to persons, objects that may or may not be available, and attachment to God, who is perceived as always available. This association has also been found in recent research with volleyball players, where Preoccupied and Secure attachment styles were related to greater group cohesion (Tiryaki & Cepikkurt, 2007), and in a hospice setting, where Secure and Preoccupied styles were found to seek emotional social support more often than the Fearful and Dismissing styles (Hawkins, Howard, & Oyebode, 2007).

The Fearful style showed the most pronounced effect in the Discontent scale. These persons appear to be unhappy with their religious situation. They were also highest on the Pleading scale which would put them into a begging mode in their relationship with God. The results indicated that persons with a Fearful attachment style used positive spiritual methods of coping to a lesser degree than other groups.

The fact the Interpersonal Religious Support scores failed to reach significance might simply be due to the fact that the group was chosen from among
those who were already regularly active in church. In our sample it may simply have been that seeking help from clergy, church fellowship, and the like seemed only natural since they were all active in church.

Our sample of rather highly religious persons differed in their styles of attachment to God, and these differing styles varied in their religious coping mechanisms. This leads one, perhaps, to the notion that the Attachment to God Inventory might serve as a useful tool for researchers, clinicians, pastors, and other groups in understanding individuals’ complex relationships with God. Knowing the attachment style might give insight into how the person might use religion to cope with a crisis. Rather than simply using the less precise term, insecure attachment, having persons complete the measure and ascertaining the score, the counselor might realize the benefit in being more reassuring to Fearful, acknowledging the independence of the Dismissing, and providing increased opportunity for the Secure and Preoccupied to find support in their religious principles and to interact with the community for assistance in the crisis.

Using the AGI as a measure to evaluate various experiences designed to move persons toward greater maturity in faith would seem a worthwhile procedure to follow. Beck (2006) has shown evidence that persons with a Secure attachment style “… were more engaged in theological exploration and were tolerant of Christian faiths different from their own” (p. 131). They “… also reported more peace and less distress in their spiritual lives” (p. 131).

Limitations of this research include the relative small sample size and the homogeneity of the sample in regard to church attendance, which limits generalizability and the study’s external validity. A limited number of measures and those being self-report measures must be taken into consideration. Social desirability might easily have guided much of the participants’ responses. The questionnaires were administered within a church setting and this may have influenced the participants’ emotional states at the time of completion. The correlational nature of the study, with data collection only at one point in time, should be considered.

Finally, the chicken/egg dilemma, which came first, religious coping or attachment to God is fodder for future research. As noted in the introduction there is adequate justification to propose that coping with stress can be seen as a motivation for the development of attachment in the first place. Attachment provides comfort and security for the developing child as the child seeks relief from distress. Theoretically, what the child is doing is seeking attachment in order to cope with the vicissitudes of life. On the other hand attachment provides a continuing process which allows the person to find solace in face of the world’s problems. Therefore, the conclusion might be drawn that coping with stress provides the motivation for the development of attachments and then attachments provide the means by which persons are able to cope with stress in life. These attachments may be seen from the view of interpersonal relationships and from the view of the relations one has with God. In our opinion, administering the AGI to persons under our care could assist them in self-knowledge regarding their relation to God and thus better enable us in providing help to them in coping with life stress.

References


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