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Working Model Correspondence Between Adult Attachment and Attachment to God

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Contemporary attachment research suggests that there are two underlying of dimensions of adult attachment—anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The former dimension pertains to the degree to which adults are concerned with a desire for closeness and protection, and also their worries about the availability of and their worth to their partners. The latter dimension, avoidance, concerns adults’ discomfort with closeness to others, and their preference for self-reliance and emotional distance. Individuals can be high or low on either dimension relative to other adults, and those low on both dimensions are considered “securely attached.”

Kirkpatrick (2005) has proposed that for theists a representation of God can serve as an attachment figure as well, and that the same two dimensions of attachment—anxiety and avoidance—can apply to this relationship. For example, an individual might worry about her closeness to God, and whether or not God will find her worthy of love (high anxiety), or she might feel very comfortable entering into a close relationship with her deity, with no concern about her reliance upon that deity for support (low avoidance).

There are two hypothesized models of fit between adult attachment and attachment to God. The *compensation model* posits that individuals seek an attachment relationship with God to compensate for insecure attachments in other areas of their lives. The *correspondence model*, on the other hand, suggests that individuals will have an attachment relationship to God that corresponds to their attachment relationships with others. Beck and McDonald (2004) found partial support for the correspondence view, especially with respect to the anxiety dimension of attachment.

The goal of the present study was to replicate Beck and McDonald’s research and include additional measures of religiosity to determine if 1) the same pattern of partial correspondence holds, and 2) if anxious and avoidant attachment to God are related to dimensions of religiosity.

Method

Data were collected from 175 female and 83 male students (mean age = 19.2 years) at one of two Midwest liberal arts colleges affiliated with the religiously moderate Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Participants received course credit for participation. The majority of participants self-identified as white (94.2%) and Christian (90.3%), with Lutherans (47.7%) and Catholics (20.9%) comprising the two largest denominational affiliations.

All participants completed six questionnaires. The first was a measure of adult attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationships—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The two subscales of the ECR-R, anxiety and attachment, each contain 18 items and are responded to on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. The items on the anxiety subscale (e.g., “I worry a lot about my relationships”) had an internal consistency reliability of .92, while the avoidance subscale items (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”) had a reliability of .94.

The second questionnaire was the 24-item Revised Religious Life Inventory (Hills, Francis, & Robbins, 2005), which taps three dimensions of religious experience. The first dimension is intrinsic religiosity, which concerns the degree to which participants view religion as a valuable end in itself, as opposed to a means to an end (e.g., “My religious beliefs are what lie behind my whole approach to life”). The second dimension of the RLI-R measures extrinsic religiosity, or religion as a means to an end, something “instrumental” or “utilitarian” (e.g., “The purpose of prayer is to secure a happy and peaceful life”). The third dimension of religious experience tapped by the RLI-R, the quest dimension, assesses the degree to which religion involves a “constant questioning and entertainment of doubt as a means of spiritual growth” (p. 1390; e.g., “Questions are far more central to religious experience than are answers”). Each item of the RLI-R was measured on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale. The internal consistency reliabilities of the three scales in this study were acceptable (.92 for internal; .74 for extrinsic; .85 for quest), and nearly identical to the reliabilities reported by Hills et al. (.93, .76, and .83, respectively).

Participants completed two measures of attachment to God, each of which has an anxiety subscale and an avoidance subscale. The anxiety subscale of the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI; Beck & McDonald, 2004) is comprised of 14 items, such as “I often worry about whether God is pleased with me,” and had an internal consistency reliability of .91in this study. The avoidance subscale of the AGI also contains 14 items (e.g., “I prefer not to depend too much on God”), and had a reliability of .90. The Attachment to God Scale (AGS; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002) contains a 3-item anxiety subscale (e.g., “God sometimes seems very warm and other times very cold to me”) with an internal consistency reliability of .66 in this study, and a 6-item avoidance subscale (e.g., “God seems impersonal to me”) with a reliability of .90.

The fifth questionnaire all participants completed was the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which had an internal consistency reliability of .89 in the present study. Finally, subjects completed the 33-item Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

Results

Since “attachment to God” was the primary construct of relevance in the present research, data from 6 participants who self-identified as atheists were excluded from analyses.

*Correlational Analyses*

Partial correlations controlling for social desirability revealed that anxious attachment to God positively correlated with adult attachment anxiety (AGI: *r*(243) = .36, *p* < .001; AGS: *r*(243) = .29, *p* < .001). Avoidant attachment to God, however, was not significantly correlated with adult attachment avoidance (AGI: *r*(243) = .05, *p* = .42; AGS: *r*(243) = .09, *p* = .18) (see Table 1).

As indicated in Table 1, avoidant attachment to God was negatively related to intrinsic religiosity (AGI: *r*(243) = -.80, *p* < .001; AGS: *r*(243) = -.67, *p* < .001) and extrinsic religiosity (AGI: *r*(243) = -.33, *p* < .001; AGS: *r*(243) = -.31, *p* < .001). Avoidant attachment to God was also positively correlated with quest religiosity (AGI: *r*(243) = .24, *p* < .001; AGS: *r*(243) = .24, *p* < .001).

Anxious attachment to God, however, was not significantly correlated with intrinsic religiosity (AGI: *r*(243) = .12, *p* = .06; AGS: *r*(243) = -.12, *p* = .07), but was positively correlated with extrinsic religiosity (AGI: *r*(243) = .24, *p* < .001; AGS: *r*(243) = .20, *p* = .002) and negatively correlated with self-esteem (AGI: *r*(243) = -.29, *p* < .001; AGS: *r*(243) = -.20, *p* = .001).

*Regression Analyses*

We performed a series of multiple regression analyses to examine the unique effects of social desirability, adult attachment, and attachment to God on religiosity and self-esteem. Each of these regression analyses was statistically significant (see Table 2 for the multiple R and *F* statistics).

Of particular relevance for this study, controlling for social desirability, adult avoidance attachment, and adult anxiety attachment , avoidant attachment to God (using AGI only) explained statistically significant unique variance in intrinsic religiosity (β = -.79), extrinsic religiosity (β = -.30), and quest religiosity (β = .26). Controlling for those same variables, anxious attachment to God (again, using AGI only) explained unique variance in extrinsic religiosity (β = .14), quest religiosity (β = .14), and self-esteem (β = -.16).

Discussion

Consistent with Beck and McDonald (2004), we found partial evidence for the correspondence view of the relationship between adult attachment and attachment to God. Specifically, adult attachment anxiety and anxious attachment to God were positively correlated in our subjects. As Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008) note, attachment correspondence is consistent with an internal working model perspective of attachment. That is, repeated experiences with important others in life (parents, peers) lead to the development of a set of expectations about relationships (the working model) that the individual uses as a guide for future relationship development.

The absence of a relationship between adult attachment avoidance and avoidant attachment to God suggests neither correspondence nor compensation. Beck and McDonald (2004) speculate that the nature of avoidance—a negative view of the other in the relationship—in perhaps not particularly relevant in a typical Judeo-Christian understanding of the divine. Nevertheless, we did find support for the unique contribution of avoidant attachment to God in explaining variability in all three dimensions of religiosity, and this was particularly the case in the strong negative relationship between avoidant attachment to God and intrinsic religiosity.

In sum, the present research found additional support for a correspondence view of anxious attachment to God. A somewhat less clear picture of the nature of avoidant attachment to God emerged here, and future work needs to be done to clarify both the nature and genesis of this dimension of attachment to God.

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Table 1

*Partial Correlations Among Attachment to God, Adult Attachment, Religiosity, and Self-Esteem (Controlling for Socially Desirable Responding)*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | ECR Avoidance | ECR  Anxiety | Intrinsic Relig. | Extrinsic Relig. | Quest  Relig. | Self-  Esteem |
| AGI Anxiety | .05 | .36d | .12a | .24d | .11a | -.29d |
| AGS Anxiety | .09 | .29d | -.12a | .20c | .18c | -.20c |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| AGI Avoidance | .05 | -.02 | -.80d | -.33d | .24d | .01 |
| AGS Avoidance | .09 | .07 | -.67d | -.31d | .24d | -.09 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Note: n = 245; a: *p* < .10 b: *p* < .05 c: *p* < .01 d: *p* < .001

Table 2

Multiple Regression Results Showing Attachment to God Dimensions (AGI) Account for Unique Variance in Religiosity and Self-Esteem

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | *β* |  | *t* |  | *p* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Criterion: Intrinsic Religiosity* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Social Desirability | .09 |  | 2.22 |  | .041 |
| Adult Attachment—Anxiety | -.05 |  | -1.08 |  | .378 |
| Adult Attachment—Avoidance | .10 |  | 2.38 |  | .018 |
| Attachment to God—Anxiety | .002 |  | .06 |  | .96 |
| Attachment to God—Avoidance | -.79 |  | -20.53 |  | <.001 |
| Multiple R = .67; *F*(5, 241)=95.88, *p* < .001 |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Criterion: Extrinsic Religiosity* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Social Desirability | .02 |  | .35 |  | .728 |
| Adult Attachment—Anxiety | .18 |  | 2.55 |  | .011 |
| Adult Attachment—Avoidance | -.07 |  | -1.13 |  | .260 |
| Attachment to God—Anxiety | .14 |  | 2.14 |  | .033 |
| Attachment to God—Avoidance | -.30 |  | -4.97 |  | <.001 |
| Multiple R = .17; *F*(5, 240)=9.66, *p* < .001 |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Criterion: Quest Religiosity* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Social Desirability | .05 |  | .74 |  | .458 |
| Adult Attachment—Anxiety | .07 |  | .89 |  | .375 |
| Adult Attachment—Avoidance | .003 |  | .04 |  | .965 |
| Attachment to God—Anxiety | .14 |  | 2.04 |  | .042 |
| Attachment to God—Avoidance | .26 |  | 4.11 |  | <.001 |
| Multiple R = .09; *F*(5, 241)=4.51, *p* = .001 |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Criterion: Self-Esteem* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Social Desirability | .19 |  | 3.47 |  | .001 |
| Adult Attachment—Anxiety | -.38 |  | -5.97 |  | <.001 |
| Adult Attachment—Avoidance | -.09 |  | -1.56 |  | .119 |
| Attachment to God—Anxiety | -.16 |  | -2.78 |  | .006 |
| Attachment to God—Avoidance | -.02 |  | .29 |  | .769 |
| Multiple R = .34; *F*(5, 242)=24.82, *p* < .001 |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |