



Relationship between Attachment and the Development of Religiosity in Children and Adolescents

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Editorial

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Abbreviations: PRC: Positive Religious Coping; NRC: Negative Religious Coping.

Editorial

As we know from the literature, a secure attachment bond also entails a number of beneficial effects on the development of the developing human being. In particular, in addition to autonomy, it has been found to be associated already in infancy with positive social interactions (NICHD, 2001), social skills (such as empathy, cooperation, etc.) better academic performance during school age, as well as healthy self-esteem and a strong sense of identity in adulthood [1-4] - all factors essential to the developmental pathway of self-actualization [5].

Attachment theory further argues that children's early relationships with caregivers even affect their moral development. Secure attachments provide the foundation for empathy, moral thinking and the internalization of moral values.

John Bowlby's attachment theory, although not explicitly focused on moral development, has important implications for understanding how early relationships and experiences influence moral thinking and behavior later in life.

Research evidence also suggests that the type of infant attachment affects not only the ability to develop close interpersonal relationships, but even the development of faith and relationship with God [6]. That is, the development of 'trust' appears to be substantially influenced by the early

learning of security as experienced by the infant within his or her environment (e.g., a warm, safe and secure environment, as opposed to an environment in which one experiences pain, neglect and abuse). Therefore, if the infant experiences a stable, loving and secure relationship during these early years, then it is very likely that the infant will also develop a sense of trust and security for the human and/or divine "other".

Conversely, if the infant has negative experiences at this critical stage of his or her life, he or she is likely to be led to a lack of trust in the world, his or her fellow human beings and God. Thus, the first form of faith (trust) rests on the foundation of basic trust and hope that comes from caring for others.

According to Kirkpatrick [7], children whose attachment relationships with parents are secure are likely to adopt their parents' religious beliefs, while those whose attachment relationships are insecure are likely to be less influenced by parents. Further, based on attachment theory [8,9], Kirkpatrick suggests that one's relationship with God can also be viewed as an attachment relationship. And as with any attachment relationship established beyond infancy, the quality of the primary attachment relationship (or relationships) established with caregivers in infancy and early childhood is expected to strongly influence the qualitative characteristics of the relationship with God.

Secure relationships with religious parents can promote high levels of religiosity and belief in a loving and supportive God. Insecure relationships, particularly with religious parents, can promote agnosticism and atheism or belief in a God who is punitive and demanding. In other cases

when primary attachment relationships were insecure, the relationship with God may serve as a compensatory role. In adolescence or adulthood, a person may turn to a personal relationship with God in an attempt to gain the security that was not offered in the early attachment relationship. In support of this view, Kirkpatrick, et al. [10] report that sudden religious conversions were four times more common among adults who retrospectively reported having insecure, avoidant attachment relationships with their mothers than among adults reporting secure attachment relationships with their mothers. Further, these researchers found that respondents who reported avoidant attachment relationships with relatively nonreligious mothers were the most religious, particularly the most conservatively religious, of all study respondents. Interestingly, it should also be noted that when maternal religiosity was high, respondents' religiosity was not associated with attachment bonding [11].

Specifically, regarding the relationship between religiosity and attachment, researchers such as Granqvist, et al. [12] proposed two different hypotheses:

- The compensation hypothesis proposes that children who have experienced insecure attachment relationships (e.g., abused children) are likely to seek God for purposes of compensating for a secure parental figure, where God is experienced as a substitute for a loving attachment figure.
- The correspondence hypothesis, on the other hand, suggests that individuals who have experienced secure attachment relationships have established the foundation upon which a corresponding healthy relationship with God could be built. There appears to be a strong correspondence between the ways in which children view their parents and the ways in which children view God. Thus, the 'correspondence model' holds that children's attachments to their parents serve as internal models and a basis on which to develop their later attachment to God: In other words, children with secure attachments to parents are expected to have, typically, secure attachments to God as well, and those with insecure attachments to parents are expected to have insecure attachments to God as well. It is reported, in fact, that children who had secure attachment relationships with the primary caregiver tended to view God more affectionately and less punitively compared to maltreated children [12].

Also, research evidence suggests that adolescents with secure attachment to parents are likely to adopt the beliefs of faith and attitudes toward God (or lack thereof) that their parents adopt [13].

In contrast, the 'compensation' or 'substitution model' argues that an early insecure attachment to a parent does

not negatively predict one's fate in terms of one's subsequent relationship with the 'parent' God, but that it may instead, the developing human being may develop a 'compensatory/restorative' relationship with a God (of consistent love and responsiveness, forgiveness and protection) as a substitute for the 'inadequate' attachment relationship and parental figure.

There is research evidence for both attachment processes in adult individuals, but in children there is only limited evidence for the 'matching model', as the compensation process may not occur until adolescence and/or later [14].

In particular, regarding the relationship between child maltreatment and religiosity, most of the few existing empirical studies support the correspondence hypothesis. Thus, often, child victims of abuse are less likely to believe in God and to be actively involved in religious groups [15-17]. Our knowledge about child abuse and religiosity is limited because much of the previous research has focused exclusively on religiosity among adult female survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Bierman's [18] study overcame these limitations of previous research by examining the effects of physical and emotional abuse on religiosity in a sample of US adults in middle age. Findings showed that abuse perpetrated by fathers during childhood was associated with a decrease in religious involvement among adults, now children.

However, a study by Johnson, et al. [19] supported both the offset hypothesis and the correspondence hypothesis, showing that instances of secure attachment on the one hand, and experiences of abuse on the other, were associated with images of loving God. More specifically, the researchers studied children's attitudes about their parents and God and found that abused children perceived their parents as less kind and more angry than non-abused children. However, both abused and non-abused children perceived God as a kind and familiar figure [12].

On the other hand, the 'correspondence model' is also supported by some research with children: Specifically, when asked to place a symbolic God figure on a signboard near a child figure (in an attachment scenario), children who had secure attachment to their mothers placed the God figure closer to the child than children who had insecure attachment. This pattern was also seen in children aged 5-7 years in Sweden in [20] and in children aged 6-8 years in Italy [21].

This theory has been supported by other studies. For example, research showed that children were more likely to describe a loving, present God if their fathers were absent from the home [22]. Similarly, adolescents with insecure

attachment were likely to seek security by joining religious organizations [and others rejected their parents' religion because of distant or difficult relationships with them [23].

Throughout childhood and adolescence, attachment theorists hold that the developing person begins with a representation of a 'living God' based on their relationship with their parents and gradually, increasingly sees God in relational and interpersonal terms. Thus, these clearly conscious relationships with God may become more evident during adolescence. One example, concerns how children and adolescents respectively experience prayer: that is, there is a shift from the more 'impersonal' attitude of children 'praying "talking to God"', and the more intimate/adolescent attitude of praying "talking to God" [24].

In short, attachment theory can clarify many aspects of religious and spiritual development. It is, however, the case that the review of previous research, particularly that relating to the relationship between child abuse and religiosity, is rather ambiguous and very little is known about the religious attitudes and beliefs of children with different experiences of abuse. More systematic research (with abused children in general and with abused children in particular), with valid measurements, is therefore needed to capture the internal processes and more 'internalised' functions and representations of the image of God in relation to the attachment model, at unconscious, physical, and non-verbal levels [25].

Finally, it is worth noting that religious coping involves cognitive and behavioural features, can be emotion or problem focused, and can be adaptive or maladaptive. Pargament, et al. [26] distinguish between positive/healthy religious coping (Positive Religious Coping or PRC); i.e., evaluating the situation as an opportunity for spiritual growth) and negative religious coping (Negative Religious Coping or NRC); i.e., interpreting the stressor as punishment from God). The former form of (healthy) religiosity seems to correspond to adaptive emotional coping, while the latter to maladaptive emotional coping [26].

Helping PRC includes considerations about the meaning of life and a secure relationship with a good and merciful God [27]. It may correspond to behaviors such as prayer, seeking support in sacred scriptures, and cognitive elements such as turning one's attention to eternity and the afterlife, or accepting adversity as part of a wise plan of God, but one that is in one's (spiritual) best interest [28]. In contrast, negative religious NRC attitudes are suggested to reflect negative appraisals of God's power and intention and the perception of a less secure relationship with a divine being [29].

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