

How early attachment experiences effect how an individual relates to a Christian God
and how this manifests in later life to his or her image of the God he or she believes
in.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.”

Signature

Victoria Stewart

Date

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how early attachment experience effects how an individual relates to a Christian God, and how this manifests in later life. The relationship dynamic which is created in early attachment falls within four categories: secure, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant and dismissing (Ainsworth, 1978). In journals of psychology and religion research on attachment has studied the effect that this early experience may or may not have on an individual's relationship with God. The two predominant theories to come out of this research are by Kirkpatrick who formed two hypotheses to give some understanding of how early attachment effects this relationship. The first research was conducted in 1990 which found that an individual's internal working model which was created between the infant and the primary caregiver can influence how one then views God, this was termed the correspondence hypothesis. Further research in 1992 found a subgroup which showed a significant number of participants responded to God through a "sudden conversion" experience. This phenomenon Kirkpatrick termed the compensation hypothesis as findings suggested that God acted as a surrogate attachment figure in the absence of a secure one during infancy or in an individual's life at present. This dissertation examines the literature on these two hypothesis in order to assist therapists in their own understanding of how attachment experiences can effect how an individual relates to God. This information is collated in the hope that therapists can work with clients who are struggling in their relationship with God with more awareness of the dynamics between human beings and God. The method used is a modified systematic literature review of articles which examine how attachment theory can be used to understand how an individual relates to God. Religions other than Christianity are

excluded both for simplicity and to allow for a more in depth examination into the relationship dynamics between an individual and a Christian God. It is suggested by Kirkpatrick that the two hypotheses are integrated to reflect the complexity of human relationships and this is discussed in the final chapter. Pathways for further research are suggested.

Chapter One: Introduction

Sigmund Freud and his influence on conceptualising Religion

In my training as a psychotherapist I have struggled to resolve what has appeared to be a conflict of interest between psychotherapy and Christianity. Upon entering the program at AUT I worried that my beliefs would be looked upon with condescension and thought of as a crutch for all my un-processed “issues”. This led me to hide that aspect of my faith; to become confused as to who I was, and to question my beliefs. Although I had a felt sense that Christianity and psychotherapy could work companionably alongside one another, instead I felt that in me were warring religions, it was not until my final year of training that I gained insight into what I was projecting on to the training programme from my own attachment pattern, and began to think about how spirituality can help in the therapeutic process.

I looked to Freud to try and gain an understanding of why there may be a conflict between God and psychoanalysis. Ever since his proclamation that God is an illusion (Freud, 1961a) psychologists have been curious about the relationship between early childhood experience and a person’s religiosity. Freud theorized that religion has its origins in the Oedipal period of child development during which a child could not rationally manage the forces of the environment outside himself and the instinctual forces within; consequently, he said, the child develops a God image on the lines of his or her own father. Freud posited:

As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts

throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent role of a divine providence allays our fear of the dangers of life. (Freud, 1961a, p. 30)

Clearly Freud saw an attachment to a spiritual figure as a crutch with which to survive life, a perspective to which psychoanalytic psychotherapy has for the most part continued to adhere (Florence, 2009).

However, I came to an alternative conclusion about the relationship between psychotherapy and Christian theology. What I came to appreciate during this research is just how interwoven the concepts of psychotherapy and Christianity are. Through Freud, psychotherapy is evidently a result of western society's needs, which means that it has its origins in western society. When I think about how both areas treat illness and healing, they no longer seem to come into conflict with one another. Instead I suggest that with both it is the process of healing which is the focus, and can be a path walked down through both psychotherapy and an attachment to God.

Attachment Theory

Freud's statement reflects a view that the projection of God is the result of an individual's needs not being met by their parents and, therefore, is a way of coping in the world. Attachment theory describes caregiving as a basic component of human nature and essential for personal and relationship wellbeing (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1988). Bowlby originated this theory in a response to Freud's and his followers' psychoanalytic concepts, believing that there had to be more than a projected relationship from infant to mother (Karen, 1994). Bowlby believed that this innate need to attach was born out of a desire for a safe haven or secure base to which

the infant could turn when distressed. In this relationship the infant would be soothed and receive care and nurture, rather like how humans can feel in their relationship to God.

Researchers and theorists such as Ainsworth (1978) and Bretherton (1992), have continued to develop attachment theory further in order to deepen an understanding of this powerful relationship. Current literature describes four attachment styles: secure, avoidant-insecure and anxious-insecure, which I will discuss with more depth in chapter three.

Interestingly most of the research which I found focused on the above three attachment styles and did not refer to the fourth category of attachment, disorganised attachment style. Why this is, I can only speculate. Disorganised attachment in a person can be caused when the primary caregiver is either frightened or frightening. Here they are both a source of fear and the secure base for the infant, a dilemma which research suggests could be the cause of some psychopathologies. For the sake of consistency in my dissertation I have not included it in my research as there have been limited findings to suggest any conclusions. However, I think that future research could explore this important category to understand attachment to God.

My Journey

It seems to me that loving God can be as complicated and confusing as any other human attachment. My experience of attachment came from being the only child of two forceful personalities, in particular my father who became almost God-like in my imagination. Because of the dynamics in the family which were created through his alcohol consumption and angry, verbally abusive outbursts I retreated into myself, and became avoidant of any hint of dependency on an adult. I learnt to be self-sufficient and my belief system was that I did not need anyone else, I could look

after myself. I saw my father as punishing, critical, demanding perfection from everyone else, and above all easily angered. Even though I strived to meet his standards I was never “good enough.”

In my relationship with my mother, I also worried about her being upset with me, as I learnt that this could have hurtful consequences when coming from someone in authority, but I also experienced unconditional love from her, trusted her as a safe haven and experienced her as compassionate and soothing in my distress.

In my relationship with God I have transferred my avoidant attachment style onto Him, becoming independent from Him, fearing His wrath and punishment and believing ultimately that He is not happy with me because of my imperfections. I feel I will never be good enough, so remain emotionally distant. Interestingly I became a Christian through an understanding of who Jesus was. He carried my mother attachment, and I felt that He was gentle, understanding, compassionate and alongside me. At church I was taught about the characteristics of the Holy Trinity: God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and in time they represented in my mind the different internal objects, God being my father, Jesus my mother and the Holy Spirit the counsellor or sibling.

Attachment to a Paternal or Maternal Figure?

An obvious conflict in this dissertation surrounds reconciling how attachment theory which focuses primarily on the relationship between mother and baby, can apply to a human and God relationship when God is predominantly seen as paternal. In my own journey it has been Jesus who holds the maternal connection for me and who gave me an opening to being close to God. I experienced the Holy Spirit as an intermediary to God, an advocate on my behalf and likened to a sibling role.

While this is how I reconciled my internal objects, much of the literature in this

area focuses on the “primary caregiver” as distinct from using the term “mother”. I have resolved the conflict by replacing the term mother with primary caregiver who embodies the secure base, safe haven and nurturer, characteristics also of God.

I believe that God holds both masculine and feminine characteristics, alternating between encouraging war, being punishing, strong in His commandments and structure for how the Jews should live, with then being a loving, nurturing, forgiving God in the Psalms and Song of Solomon. There are many scriptures which reinforce the interpretation that the relationship between human and God is to be seen as a parent/child relationship; Isaiah 49:15 “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”, Matthew 6:9 “This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

In this dissertation I write about God who is the Holy Trinity and contains all three attributes: paternal, maternal and sibling, and I reconcile the theoretical conflict by using the term primary caregiver when referring to an individual’s human attachment experience.

Table 1 *Table reconciling attachment figures*

Father	God
Mother	Jesus
Sibling/Surrogate/Counsellor	Holy Spirit

I have chosen to use the New International Version of the bible to reference from as I prefer the relatable style of language which this translation offers. I also need to acknowledge that although I use bible scriptures as reference, this is only one

interpretation of what has been written; theological debates over scriptural meaning have been ongoing for over two thousand years. I do feel that scriptural reference should be included in some points during this dissertation, as the bible is an integral point of reference in Christianity, just as Freud is in psychotherapy.

Aim of Research

Having called myself a Christian for thirteen years, I often became curious during my training as a psychotherapist about what brings different people into believing in God. I knew my own journey, but was aware that people have very different experiences in connecting with God. In talking to others I became interested in how some had no conflict in trusting God, whereas others struggled daily with beginning to even understand Him.

My own spiritual orientation.

My own experience is through the Christian Pentecostal churches, this is where my thoughts and influence have been concentrated. Pentecostal churches are characterised by charismatic movements, such as speaking in tongues (glossolalia), and being “born again” through water baptism and the laying on of hands for healings. The Day of Pentecost was first spoken about in Acts 2:4 when the Holy Spirit fell upon those who were gathered and they began to speak of other tongues. This was to fulfil Jesus’ prophecy that the “counsellor” would come in His name (John 14:16).

Pentecostal churches draw from this experience of the early believers and emphasise moving away from religious law and towards a personal relationship with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. It is from this experiential foundation of a physiological and emotional connection to God, that I have an understanding of what it means to have a personal relationship with God. Therefore, it is through this lens of

a Christian God that I have focused my research. However, as research does not generally distinguish between the different dominations among Christianity, I have attempted to draw back from my own bias and also be inclusive. I have done this through self awareness of my bias and supervision of my work in the hope that an inclusiveness is reflected in my writing.

Society impacting church culture.

I have noticed a shift in culture within my own and other churches across Auckland, which I believe is a response to a desperate need in present society. I believe that the current western values of independence and personal happiness results in many feeling isolated, lonely and without purpose.

This belief in independence resulting in loneliness is shared by Thomas Moore (1992), a monk for twelve years within the Catholic sect, and later a psychotherapist for fifteen years. He wrote *Care of the Soul*, which has influenced my wonderings about modern western society, and how Church can fill the gaping need for connection in response to this. Moore believes that the emotional complaints of our time are: “emptiness, meaninglessness, vague depression, disillusionment about marriage, family and relationship, a loss of values, yearning for personal fulfilment and a hunger for spirituality” (p. xvi). He feels that these symptoms reflect a loss of soul, a disjointedness within ourselves that we need to return to instead of seeking salvation as an answer. Moore believes that psychology has divided science and spirituality, but for people to regain their sense of living soulfully there needs to be a reawakening of spirituality and psychology being seen as one.

In my wonderings during services at church I have thought on this idea of loss of soul, and observed how modern day Pentecostal churches have focused more and more on the personal relationship with God being the essence of Jesus’ message, the

crux of the New Testament and above all the sole goal of our life here on earth. The modern churches predominantly meets the individual at their emotional needs, talking about a God who longs to be in a personal relationship with people, and who is always there unconditionally. In a western society which recoils at the idea of surrendering to God, it is interesting that for some individuals this is exactly what they are seeking –not to be alone in life anymore.

Today church is becoming more business orientated, global and psychologically aware. I believe the point at which psychotherapy and Christianity agrees, is in reaching out to confront modern belief that independence is something for which we should all strive. In attaining this independence, there is a meaninglessness, loneliness and emptiness which seems prevalent in so many people. In my experience of psychotherapy, an aim is to learn inter-dependence; the ability to be in relation to oneself while also being in relationship with a group of individuals. It is this emphasis on relationship which appeals to a more post-modern viewpoint, and it refutes religious law. In modern churches the word “religion” has become equated with law and ritual. Instead the word religion is replaced by “relationship” and one interpretation being taught is that Jesus came to earth in order to offer a way to have a relationship with God. The concept of religion is being taught as an almost anti-Jesus’ message, and is more aligned with the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day who sought to have Him killed. The message that is taught is that God wants a personal relationship with you, it is not about religion, but all about being in relationship. For those with an insecure attachment this seems to appeal to an absence of a secure base.

Here is where I see the concept of a God image being the most applicable, as this is God the idealized parent rather than a real worked through relationship. The

God image becomes what I will later explain as an attachment figure which is compensatory (Kirkpatrick, 1998).

It seems that the use of God image as a concept is useful for talking about the link between attachment theory and how one relates to a God image. It appears that people's images of God correlate with their image of parents (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, p. 320), especially with their mother. This explains how a person's projection of their internal working model on to God can create a God image which may or may not be consistent with their relational experience of Him.

Summary

In this dissertation I aim to explore whether early attachment experiences effect how one relates to God. This interest has derived from my own personal experience as a Christian, where I have often wondered what draws some people to God. I have also personally experienced how my early attachment experiences with my mother and father have affected how I relate to God and I aim to find research which can provide some findings in assisting in gaining insight into this complex relationship. In the following chapter I will outline how I researched this topic.

Chapter 2: Methods and Research Design

Introduction

This chapter defines what a modified systematic review is and states the rationale for why this methodology is used to address this research question.

Qualitative rigour is discussed with reference to the sampling criteria (exclusion and inclusion factors) as well as how my own personal bias is addressed.

The Nature of Systematic Reviews

Systematic reviews are derived from the philosophy of best-evidence practice. What makes this modality's reliability distinct from a standard literature review is the explicitness of the methodology and the criteria for the articles which are selected and reviewed. It provides an overview of all the available evidence related to a narrow question. Rosenthal (2004) states that "systematic reviews, as compared to traditional narrative reviews, attempt to reduce bias through the inclusiveness and reproducibility of the search process as well as the selection process for studies that are included" (p. 24). What this means is that systematic review results can be used with more confidence than narrative reviews when making a decision about patient treatment.

The Cochrane collaboration views systematic reviews as "high-level overview of primary research on a particular question that tries to identify, select, synthesize and appraise all high quality research evidence" (Higgins & Green, 2011, para. 1.2.2). Higgins and Green (2011) state in the *Cochrane Handbook* that the purpose of a systematic review is to assist the health care professional in achieving best-evidence based practice through collaborating, analyzing and interpreting all qualitative and

quantitative data on the review question. It uses “explicit, systematic methods that are selected with a view to minimizing bias” (Higgins & Green, 2011 para. 1.2.2) and therefore provides information from which reliable interpretation can be gained.

Evidence-based practice.

The systematic literature reviews has its origins in evidence-based practice which was originally used in quantitative studies using randomized trials to assess the usefulness of the data. However, this criteria is not appropriate when considering that psychotherapy is focused on the subjective experience, as objective data conflicts with the “day to day, moment to moment experience of the fluid, moving nature of personal meaning in the therapeutic encounter” (Milton, 2007, p.161). For this reason systematic reviews are used in the attempt to understand human experience more deeply.

Systematic reviews have their roots in evidence-based practice, which has had an interesting effect on mental health, and this impact seems to be a reflection of the culture we live in where information is readily at our finger tips and sometimes in overwhelming quantities. In the 1980s and 1990s the information available on particular treatments accelerated, which lead to the demand for “evidence of the comparative effectiveness and costs of both psychological and pharmacological treatments” (Geddes, 2000, p. 66). For the first time there were resources available to allow the clinician to obtain the best and most relevant evidence for patients or clients. Geddes believed that the “aim of evidence-based practice in mental health is to reduce unnecessary variations in clinical practice” (p. 74), which therefore leads to best-evidence practice.

Systematic Literature Reviews Within the Context of Psychotherapy Literature

Davidson and Tolich (2003) affirms that Systematic literature reviews not only provide best evidence practice, but they also reiterate that the aim is to reduce bias while promoting accessible information. As psychotherapy is considered to be both an art and a science (Bugenthal, 1987; Moore, 1992; Yalom, 1980), there is an uneasy relationship between quantifying what may seem unquantifiable. As best-evidence practice has grown into being the “gold star” for assessing what treatments to use, there has been increased political, economic and social pressure on psychotherapy and psychology to meet this standard (Geddes, *ibid*, 2011). The “identification of empirically supported therapies met with outrage from some US clinical psychologist practitioners” (Geddes, p. 78), with their main criticisms being that the use of the findings were likely to be misused by training institutions and health care management, and also that the treatments that were used were likely to be the ones which were favoured by academics.

As psychotherapy is concerned about understanding each individual’s experience it seems that there could be generalisations and concrete conclusions that could apply to most people. It is for this reason that this dissertation is a modified systematic review, as it will be including a broad range of literature as well as qualitative research. In bringing together a wide range of literature on the findings of how attachment theory is related to how Christians attach to God, I hope to provide clinicians a thoughtful discussion on best-evidence practice for working with Christian clients.

Method

Inclusion criteria.

Firstly I decided to include all literature that had the link between attachment theory and how this relates to a person's attachment style with their Christian God. Secondly I included all psychodynamic literature that researched this question as this is my own orientation and is the context from which my dissertation is based. I also expanded my research to include articles which had the concept of "God image" as this meant that the search could include articles where this has been how the researchers have framed the concept of God. It will only be included when this is related to a Christian God image.

Exclusion criteria.

According to the above inclusion criteria I decided to focus on the concept of the Christian God and exclude gods of other religions. The reason for this being that my interest and experience is around the Christian God, and I felt that it would make the research question too broad which may reduce the reliability of the research findings.

Secondly I excluded all articles that focused on just attachment theory. The reason for this is that the literature on this theory is too extensive and it would not be productive in answering the dissertation question.

Although there are some articles which explores spirituality in the Pacific context and in the context of Aotearoa, New Zealand (Makasiale, 2013), these have been excluded as they do not focus specifically on how attachment theory can provide an understanding on how individuals relate to God.

The literature search.

To ensure that the dissertation has qualitative rigour it is important that the criteria used to select the articles is made explicit for the reader (Seers, 1999, p. 88,). I started my literature search in Psych Info as I wanted to begin within the psychodynamic area of research. Psycho Info is a research database which specialises in psychodynamic research literature. I typed in the words “attachment theory” and “Christianity” and was surprised at how much research had been done relating these two topics. However, the literature was too broad on the topic of “Christianity” so in order to be more specific I wrote, “God”, “God Image” and “Attachment” and linked them. This yielded only three relevant articles. In searching through Psychbooks there were no relevant chapters that I could access when typing in “Attachment theory and God” or “Attachment theory and Christianity”.

When I looked through the found articles it seemed as though the main researchers in the articles published their work in journals which were specifically linking psychology and religion. So I changed search engines and went through EBSCO Religion and Philosophy collection as this broadened the accessible databases, to include religious research. EBSCO is noted as being the world’s largest academic multi-disciplinary database, offering information from 1975 and providing full text for over three thousand and one hundred peer-reviewed journals. This search yielded eighteen articles.

I then went to “Summons” on the online library website which finds articles from all databases which are related to the topic typed in. In spending some time looking at the findings there were eighteen articles which fulfilled the relevance criteria of including the concepts of attachment theory and how it relates or affects a

person's relationship to their God or God image. However as this search yielded too many results I typed in my specific research question which then found ten relevant articles.

Table 2 *Psych Info Database*

Search terms	Results	Relevant articles
Attachment Theory	3825	0
Christianity	8102	0
Attachment theory & Christianity	13	1
Attachment pattern & God Image	0	0
Attachment & God Image	0	0
Attachment & God	5	3

Table 3 *EBSCO Religion & Philosophy Collection*

Search Terms	Results	Relevant Articles
Attachment & God Image	7	3
Attachment & God	50	15

Table 4 *Summons*

Search terms	Results	Relevant Articles
Attachment theory and God	7895	38
How does attachment theory relate to a God	1619	10

image		
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Summary

This chapter has outlined what is best-evidence practice and what is a systematic review. I have also rationalised why the decision for a modified systematic review has been made and how this is related within the practice and philosophy of psychotherapy. The exclusion/inclusion criteria have been made explicit with the outline of how the dissertation is based on a systematic literature review.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Influences

In this chapter I will outline the theoretical influences which have shaped my dissertation question. Primarily I will explain attachment theory as a concept and how it has evolved over time. This will provide the foundation from which I will show the links between attachment theory and how it can be related to religious concepts of the Christian God and how we relate to Him.

Overview of Attachment Theory

John Bowlby.

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1988) as an alternative to the psychoanalytic object relations school of thought in which he was originally trained. According to Bowlby, when humans are helpless infants we cling to a primary caregiver for both protection against predators and to have our needs met. When the infant is distressed the attachment system is activated, creating a behaviour of seeking out proximity with this caregiver for comfort. Even in the absence of distress, just knowing that the caregiver or attachment figure is there provides a secure base from which the infant can explore in his or her environment.

Bowlby thought that, although the attachment patterns form in infancy, the basic mechanisms are dominant throughout adulthood. It is this enduring way of relating which is most applicable to this study as it is the teenage and adult way of relating to God which I focus on in this dissertation. Attachment theory has shown to create internal working models which seem to stay as a set pattern of interaction throughout teenage years and adulthood. It forms a valuable platform from which to

explore and understand how our early childhood experiences effect relationships at a later age.

The key with attachment theory is the focus between the primary caregiver and the infant, and it is this relationship which provides an important function: that of a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) so that the infant can explore with a knowing of returning if distressed. From this attachment internal working models of parents, or caregivers, are constructed, which are the constellation of emotions, cognitions, and behaviours which structure how a person defends against insecurity.

Mary Ainsworth.

Mary Ainsworth developed Bowlby's theory further by looking at the individual differences of development and behaviour within patterns of relating. Ainsworth's research was titled the "strange situation" (Ainsworth, Blehar, Wall, Waters, 1978) as the method in which she constructed the research was to set up a play room and observe child and mother interacting, with the mother leaving for a period of time. What was important to observe was the difference in behaviours of the infant upon the mothers return. Ainswoth noticed distinct behaviours in response to the mother's absence, which she named respectively as securely and insecurely attached. Within those who were in the anxious attachment she noticed two groups; anxious-avoidant and anxious-ambivalent. Anxious-avoidant babies were dismissive of their caregivers return and appeared to be uninterested in engaging with them for a period of time. Anxious-ambivalent babies tended to be anxious and clingy initially but when the mother returned, the infant oscillated between wanting to be soothed, while at the same time arching away as though there was no consoling their distress (Karen). With the securely attached babies upon the mother's return.

To summarise Ainsworth's findings: the mother who is responsive and sensitive to her infants' distress is soothing and mirroring the child's emotions, but the mother of a insecurely attached child is inconsistent with how she might respond (Kirkpatrick, 1990). According to attachment theory one's early experience in relating to others are shaped by their experience with a primary attachment figure, and this can predict or shape expectations about the reliability of adult attachment figures.

Internal Working Models.

Ainsworth's "strange situation" confirmed Bowlby's premise that an interrupted attachment can cause an individual to suffer irreparably (Bowlby, 1969). He constructed the theory of "internal working models" from this primary attachment in order to describe how the infant's sense of self and other develops (Bowlby, 1973). The way a child's internal working model is constructed is through their experience in relating to a primary attachment figure. This has an impact both on how they see themselves and others, and on how the child's defensive system is built. Because of this defensive system and maladaptive ways of relating to others, the child will find it difficult to seek a replacement attachment figure that can rectify what may have been damaged, thus continuing the pattern of an insecure attachment with no secure base on which to rest when distressed.

Secure base.

The secure base concept of attachment theory is a core component of a theoretical understanding about God as compensation for the absence of such a secure base. Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) argue that God can meet all four criteria required for an attachment relationship; proximity maintenance, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress. They state that there are several ways in which the

individual can form an attachment relationship with God, such as “utilizing symbols and engaging in rituals and prayer” (p. 1122).

These actions are behaviours which are internally driven and reinforce Holmes’ (2001) premise that in modern western society the drive for individualism has meant that the secure base needs to be found within. For the Christian this secure base within is God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit; “For on that day you will know that I am in my father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:20).

Paradoxically, for Bowlby the secure base was originally seen as an external object, and as God cannot be seen, this raises the question of whether the internalisation of an ideal God image can replace an internal sense of security. If the individual has a diminished capacity for feeling a sense of security within themselves, can God compensate for this and be a “prop” or substitute for an inadequate secure base? This is a question which I aim to address in the following chapter.

Attachment in adult relationships.

Inspired by Bowlby’s findings on the influence of attachment in development, much has been researched regarding how adult romantic attachments can be shaped by these early patterns of relating to others. Shaver, Hazan and Bradshaw (1988) have shown how these adult romantic attachments resemble early infant-mother attachments, illustrating how identified groups of the three attachment styles could predict past romantic experiences and attitudes to romance. These correlated with early childhood experiences of how as infants they experienced relationships with their parents.

Attachment Theory and Religion

The research on how early attachment experience influences adult relationships is relevant when we begin to explore how adults relate or attach to God.

Perhaps the most important current researcher in exploring the relationship between attachment theory and God is Lee Kirkpatrick (1992, 1994, 1995). In the following chapters I will outline his main theories of compensation and correspondence as a framework of how to understand different attachment styles in relating to God. In his research Kirkpatrick has suggested that attachment theory has offered a powerful framework for understanding the psychology of how and why people need a God or God image. He focuses his research on the Christian God as a being with whom believers can interact and have a reciprocal personal relationship. According to Kirkpatrick, God meets the criteria of an attachment figure, one with whom an individual can feel a close proximity, have security, and most importantly, a secure base.

Believers maintain this relationship to God as a secure base through prayer, reading the bible, attending church meetings and communion, and the desire for proximity and safety is satisfied through these activities. Also, a belief in God offers the promise of continuing this relationship after death

This concept of God as a secure base who can be reached through prayer and with whom individual's can seek a personal relationship with Him, is strengthened through preachers using scriptures which refer to God as a father. A term reinforced in the New Testament with Jesus Himself, calling God Abba, or father. He names Himself as God's only son and begins to create an image of God as a father who loves His "children" unconditionally, and who we are commanded to love with all our heart, body and mind. The level of intimacy that Jesus teaches in the New Testament is so personal that it would seek to eliminate the emotional complaints that Moore (1992) mentions. This understanding of Jesus is based on many New Testament scriptures, such as John 14: 20, "On that day you will realise that I am in my Father,

and you are in me and I am in you”, and Paul (Romans 8:38-39) who says “that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” *It is important to note the use of language in some interpretations of the bible where the word ‘counsellor’ (John 14:26) is used, a way in which Christianity and psychotherapy appear to be interwoven at points.*

In understanding a relationship with God it seems as though attachment theory is more relevant to older children and adults than very young children. In order for an attachment to form, Bowlby believes that physical touch is crucial, so it may seem unlikely that this could translate to an attachment to a deity that can not be seen. However, Bretherton (1987) states that older children who have a more developed cognitive functioning can form an attachment symbolically and eventually just have the knowledge that mother is there.

Kaufman (1981), a theologian, notes the relationship between attachment theory and God by concluding that “the idea of God is the idea of an absolutely adequate attachment figure ... God is thought of as a protective parent who is always reliable and always available to its children when they are in need” (p. 67). He went on to say that God is the ideal attachment precisely as he is not human and, although He can understand our fallibilities, He does not have to contend with what may seem like the flaws of being human. God is experienced as completely trustworthy and in comparison to humans, seems an ideal replacement for a negative attachment experience. Of course this is the ideal God image, and perhaps not the reality experienced by others who have an insecure attachment style and may feel that God is distant and unavailable.

Kaufman's observations offer an understanding of why people turn to God when in distress, and how he becomes a secure base from which to recover from life's turmoil. According to Kirkpatrick it has long been known that sudden religious conversions often take place when an individual is in emotional distress, an observation in his research which I explore more fully in the following chapter. The significance of these findings is that by conceptualising God as a secure base or an ideal attachment figure, we gain a psychological understanding of why a person may feel so drawn to God that they would consent to "lay down their life for Him" as the scriptures ask of all believers.

However, this idea that religion provides comfort and security is not new. Kirkpatrick states that Bowlby's attachment theory offers a framework in which to understand and conceptualise the relationship between human and God without the sometimes perceived negative terms of "regression" and "repression". Instead Bowlby offered the view that need is not weakness or regression, but is part of the human condition, and that the need to be securely attached remains with us throughout our lives.

Bowlby's view is emphasised when he states that the degree to which an attachment is secure, is due to the responsiveness and availability of the principal attachment figure. This availability becomes an antidote for fear and anxiety and the child grows up with a knowing that when life becomes distressing, they are not alone, and there is a trustworthy figure to which they can turn.

However, despite the teaching that suggest God has these attributes, it has been my experience that people experience Him and relate to Him differently. While some grasp this concept of God and seem to have no conflict in consistently relating

to Him in a secure way, others struggle with fear of God, avoidance of Him and always seeking to please and earn His love.

Summary

According to the research, the correlation between attachment theory and how one relates to God appears, through research, to be strong. The concept of God being the Father who is a secure base or safe haven when His “children” are distressed allows for a symbolic representation of a healthy attachment figure for adults. Attachment theory offers an understanding of how and why people attach to a God image. This is in contrast to a point of view of Christianity as being a crutch for support through life, or a person’s inability to face life as an adult. Christian language offers a representation of an attachment figure which is available, responsive and ever present.

Chapter Four: Correspondence vs. Compensation

Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the predominant theory which has arisen from my systematic literature review. Kirkpatrick (1990, 1997, 1998) has completed extensive research on the correlation between attachment and how one relates to God, proposing two primary hypotheses to account for individual differences in one's attachment to God. In the following chapter I outline and critique this theory.

As stated previously attachment theory has been used to conceptualise a relationship with God. A person's relationship with God can serve many of the functions of an attachment relationship such as providing a secure base and being an available attachment figure. Research has also shown that an individual can display characteristics towards God which are typical of an attachment dynamic such as separation anxiety and proximity-seeking. Kirkpatrick (1997) proposes two primary hypotheses to explain an individual's different experiences in how they may relate to God: he postulated that, depending on the individual's attachment style, God may be a corresponding or compensatory attachment figure.

Summary of correspondence hypothesis.

As a corresponding attachment figure, God becomes a representation of the same pattern of relationship that the individual has experienced with their primary or significant attachment figure. For example, if the individual has experienced a secure attachment where they feel that their caregiver will help soothe their distress, they may also feel trust towards God, that He is available and responsive in times of trouble and distress. However, if the individual had a remote distant caregiver, they

may experience God also as remote, distant and difficult to connect with, which is a painful dilemma when taught at church that God is walking beside us always: “even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 23: 4

Summary of compensation hypothesis.

In the compensatory hypothesis, God represents a healing attachment figure, or one who replaces human attachments which the individual has experienced as less than optimal. He becomes a substitute that the previous negative attachment figures may have left. Here God can be idealised as the ever available, present and responsive secure base that a person may not have fully experienced in their life (Miner, 2009).

Discussion of Correspondence Hypothesis

The basic investigation of this dissertation is to understand whether early attachment experiences effect how an individual relates to God. The central hypothesis is that these early experiences create internal working models which characterise how adults view attachment figures. Kirkpatrick (1990) calls the transference of a person’s mental model onto God the correspondence hypothesis.

In Bowlby’s attachment theory, internal working models are created through our early attachments, predominantly with our primary caregiver. This mental model carries through into our later years and can influence how we then relate in our love relationships or friendships. Our beliefs about present attachment figures can be rooted in these early working models and reflect our early attachment experiences. When applying this concept of internal working models to Kirkpatrick’s theory, it means that we may expect to see God through these internal working models and see Him and His characteristics through these early experiences. “According to this

correspondence hypothesis, the security-insecurity of a person's attachment relationships with parents should predict one's religious inclinations directly rather than inversely" (Kirkpatrick, 1992, p. 18)

Bowlby stated that these internal working models tend to be mutually aligned with each other, that is, that if a caregiver is seen as loving and nurturing, the child then feels worthy of this love and care (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

This understanding of the dynamic between caregiver and infant is evident in Kirkpatrick and Shaver's 1992 research where they show that secure individuals report positive images of God. They view Him as more loving, compassionate and available than those who identify as avoidantly attached. This evidence reinforces Kirkpatrick's hypothesis that internal working models of God parallel those of close early attachment experiences. For instance, securely attached individuals with both positive images of God and themselves, correlate with mental models of attachment figures as being trustworthy, and a belief that they themselves deserve to be loved and cared for by this attachment figure (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Avoidantly attached persons tend to stay away from a close interpersonal relationship with God as He is seen as unreliable.

Correspondence during childhood.

There has been some research undertaken on the relationship between individual differences in a person's religious commitment and how this may be influenced by childhood internal working models. This religious commitment is measured through attendance to church, time given volunteering in church activities and how often an individual prays. Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak and Nixon (1997) found that the individual differences in a child's perception of their parents correlated with

how that child felt towards God. For instance, if the primary caregiver was seen as nurturing or powerful, this was how God was also seen.

These findings were reinforced in a study by Jubis (1991) who showed that children whose parental attachments had been disrupted through loss or divorce, were less likely than other children to turn to God in times of need. The findings suggest that avoidantly attached children were more likely to avoid a relationship with God as the internal working model created was one of distrust of availability or even of a potential secure base.

Cultural difference and the correspondence hypothesis.

In a study on parenting styles and religious beliefs Lambert, Triandis and Wolf (1959) (as cited in Kirkpatrick, 1992) found that cultures where the parenting styles were more of an accepting nature tended to “embrace” the supernatural deities as also being accepting whereas the cultures where the dominating parenting styles correlated with beliefs of deities as also being rejecting or malevolent. This study reinforces the correspondence hypothesis while also suggesting that there is another layer perhaps within the collective unconscious where a culture’s images are also reflected in the individual’s internal working models.

This raises the question: “Which comes first – the cultural implications or the parenting styles?” It seems extremely difficult to extract one from the other. However, it is worth noting that the beliefs promoted in different societies have an impact on the view of supernatural beings and how one may see them as rejecting or accepting.

Internal working models of self and others.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1990) deepen the correspondence hypothesis by proposing a fourth category of attachment that appears when addressing how one relates to God. He proposed a difference between fearful-avoidant and dismissing-

avoidant. Fearful-avoidant style is characterised by intimacy being avoided out of fear of being hurt, whereas dismissing-avoidant is when intimacy is avoided because of a sense of self-sufficiency.

In his analysis of Bartholomew's findings, Kirkpatrick (2005) found that positive mental models of self and others predicted higher rates of religiousness than do the negative models of self and others. Kirkpatrick infers from this analysis that the secure group was the most religious, the fearful group the least religious, and the anxious/preoccupied in the middle of these two polarities. Interestingly, positive models of others lead to a belief in a personal relationship with God. This means that to have a secure personal relationship with God, both the self and other need to be felt securely and seen as loving (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Discussion of Compensation Hypothesis.

A study by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) attempted to show an empirical correlation between attachment theory and internal constructs of God. This is an important study which laid the ground work for Kirkpatrick's (1998) theory of God as a compensatory attachment figure.

In this study participants were asked to group both themselves and their maternal attachment figures into one of three groups: secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent. They were then asked a variety of open and closed ended questions about their religious backgrounds, changes in religiousness during and since adolescence, and assessed on a scale which reflected their current religious belief systems (Kirkpatrick, 1990). The results showed significant correlations between maternal religiousness and attachment to God. As stated in the introduction, I view the term "maternal" to equate to the primary caregiver. However, the study showed that those with a secure attachment were likely to report religious beliefs which were

consistent with their experience of their caregivers. This correlates with the correspondence hypothesis, This study also showed that those who reported high levels of religious commitment, but who grew up with insecure attachments, suggest a particular sub group which Kirkpatrick refers to as those that have “sudden religious conversion” and experience a compensatory attachment style.

Sudden religious conversions.

The term “sudden religious conversions” refers to the moment when an individual will decide to believe in Jesus and begin a relationship with Him. This phenomenon is based on the scriptures in Acts chapter two. Here the writer describes the sudden conversion of many people when, on the Jewish Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared as tongues of fire on the heads of those gathered and they began to speak in other tongues. Following this the disciple, Peter, began to preach and many people were baptised into the Baptism of Jesus and formed the beginnings of the Christian church. Another example is when Saint Paul (at the time known as Saul) saw a vision of Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, and went from persecuting Christians to becoming perhaps the most influential evangelist of his time. It appeared that the conversion experience enabled people such as St Peter and St Paul to change their lives and ways of living dramatically. They appeared to have an increase in faith in God and in their desire to preach the Gospel of Jesus.

This experience of sudden conversion was found to have significant implications in Kirkpatrick’s study (1990). The results highlighted some interesting implications for those who identified with an avoidant relationship with their maternal figure. The number of respondents who reported avoidant attachments was significantly correlated to their being the most religiously committed. Kirkpatrick states that the most intriguing results were the findings relating to sudden religious

conversions. For adolescent conversion, 28% identified with an avoidant maternal attachment figure as distinct from 0.9% secure and 3.5% anxious/ambivalent. These findings seem to be the most intriguing and suggest that Kirkpatrick's hypotheses of God as a compensatory figure could provide some understanding of why an individual would experience sudden conversion.

When asked to expand on these findings, 23 out of 26 respondents reported having had a sudden religious conversion either during or after adolescence. The majority also stated having had an experience of devastating emotional crisis in their life where they felt the loss of a significant person in their life around the same time that they experienced their conversion. "The themes of loneliness, loss and love problems" (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 328) seemed to be significantly prominent in Kirkpatrick and Shaver's findings as correlating to sudden religious conversion and reinforce the premise of attachment theories that individuals require a secure base to which to return when distressed. According to Kirkpatrick's hypothesis in the 1990 study God can be seen as a compensatory attachment figure who could provide a secure base.

When this secure base is no longer available, Ainsworth (1985) noted the function of a surrogate parent acting as an important attachment figure in the absence of the child's own parents. She listed siblings, other relatives, teachers, church members and therapists as potential surrogate parents. Following this line of thought Kirkpatrick believed that God could also fill this role as an "ideal" substitute, especially for those who believe in a personal relationship with God. So, regardless of parental religious orientation, in Kirkpatrick's study those with an avoidant attachment history tended to experience high rates of sudden religious conversion which suggests that "in times of severe emotional distress, and particularly distress

associated with disrupted attachment relationship, attachment history exerts its strongest influence and overwhelms the effects of religious background” (Kirkpatrick, date, p. 329). These findings suggest that those with an avoidant attachment style would use God as a surrogate to compensate for the absence of an attachment object.

These important findings highlight the link between avoidant attachment style and sudden conversion rates, suggesting that belief and faith in God could be compensating for feelings of intense loneliness and isolation.

How does God compensate?

One way in which Kirkpatrick measures this sudden conversion experience is through the experience of glossolalia. Glossolalia is more commonly defined as “speaking in tongues” by those who experience it and is a phenomenon characteristic of Pentecostal or charismatic churches and sounds as though the individual is speaking another language which is foreign to the ear. Kirkpatrick suggests that this is a way in which God compensates for the absence of His presence and is for the benefit of those who believe in Him. It is based on the biblical scripture of Mark 16:17 where the writer stated that believers will, “speak in new tongues” and it is taught by Pentecostal church attendees that this is a “gift” from God as a sign of His existence in the place of the physical presence of Jesus.

This idea of glossolalia as compensatory appeared in Vivier’s findings in 1960 (as cited in Kirkpatrick, 1992, p. 17), where his conclusions were that a significant proportion of glossolalics come from a dysfunctional home and have a tendency to attach to objects or things in their environment for their emotional support. Whilst these are the results from only one study, these findings are interesting in relation to Kirkpatrick’s hypothesis of a compensatory God as they portray an anxious/ambivalent attachment style where the individual could be clingy and anxious

about interpersonal relationships. I wonder if this could lead to an attachment through the physical manifestation of glossolalia.

Glossolalia was found not to be the only method in which people can attach and another way in which someone can feel attached to God is through the activity of prayer. Prayer is the act of speaking with Him in the belief that His presences is right there in a personal and accessible way, “the man who prays feels himself very close to this personal God” (Heiler, 1932, p. 356). God becomes compensatory through prayer as it feels as though He is available to be communicated to in times of distress. Kirkpatrick likens prayer to social referencing (Campos & Stenberg, 1981) which is when an infant will check back with their mother when exploring their environment, making sure that the secure base is still there. Kirkpatrick (1992) calls this God referencing which “provides reassurance that God remains an available and responsive secure base” (p. 15).

This secure base could also physically manifest itself as church and is another facet in the hypothesis that God could be a compensatory attachment figure. I think church can be a confusing attachment object and interrupt an individual’s relationship with God. I wonder if people transfer their attachment to God towards the church, as for me personally it has been hard to separate the two. In this way church can be a surrogate way in which to attach to God. Church is an identifiable place where Christians can go to worship, hear teachings from the bible and commune with each other and God. As Kirkpatrick notes (1992), it is common for individuals to visit a church when they are feeling emotionally distressed and need comfort during this time. The church can compensate for an absent attachment figure and perhaps become an object that one can attach to in the absence of a concrete object rather like a favourite teddy in the absence of a mother.

Integrating the Two Hypotheses

Perhaps the most important issue to address in discussing these hypotheses is to question how the two seemingly opposing theories can co-exist in attempting to predict how one will relate to God. These two views seem to contrast, and represent opposing theories, both of which are supported by a substantial body of evidence. However, while these two points of view may seem to head in different directions, it is Kirkpatrick's (2005) view that they compliment one another, "it is entirely possible that the two hypothesis are both correct, but for different people, and /or under different sets of circumstances" (p. 128).

Kirkpatrick believes that the compensation hypothesis could be activated in an individual when there is a lack of human attachment figures or they are perceived to be unavailable or unresponsive: "In direct contrast to the correspondence hypothesis, the lack of adequate human attachments might be expected to motivate or enable belief in a God who is, in important ways, unlike one's human attachment figures" (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 127). As individuals we are so complex that one hypothesis cannot be applicable for everyone at all times, but both hypotheses could be useful to think about in terms of an individual's experience at any moment in time. This is how Kirkpatrick believes that the two hypotheses could be integrated, as they could both be applicable in different circumstances for different individuals at varying stages in life. It could be that because the two hypotheses are so contradictory that neither is useful, however it feels as though dismissing them because of this would be pre-emptive and not helpful in understanding differences in religious commitment among individuals.

Beck and McDonald (2004) concur with Kirkpatrick's integration of the two hypotheses and attempted to illustrate this in a study. They concluded that both

hypotheses could be true for different individuals at different stages of life. They stated that individuals with childhood experiences which are deficient would be likely to seek out an attachment figure who could fill an attachment gap (the compensation hypothesis). However, over time, internal working models which were formed from childhood experience of caregivers could then effect how one relates to God: “once the relationship is established, the person’s working models may tend to manifest themselves” (p. 8). Hence the correspondence hypothesis then being more applicable over time in an attachment relationship.

My personal experience is that both of these theories have been true for me at different stages of my life. When I first experienced a sudden conversion as a Christian it was an emotional experience through glossolalia and water baptism through full immersion. God became a compensatory figure for me that I attached to very readily, but it was through Jesus that I felt connected to God. Jesus became the maternal attachment figure that was always available, responsive and comforting. He filled the lonely space in me which I had carried as an only child from a young age. Jesus became a compensatory object but He aligned with my maternal internal working model.

However, as my relationship with God and Jesus continued, I also noticed my distancing away from both God and Jesus, as they began to represent the father figures for whom I needed to “be good”. As time went on it seemed that my internal working models that were set as a child reconfigured the earlier feeling that God was compensatory and instead I had a corresponding relationship where I saw God as punishing when I displeased Him, and I would work hard to gain back His approval. This reflects my relationship with my father and aligns with the corresponding theory.

For the last three years I have been exploring my attachment style in therapy and am thinking about my relationship with God, Jesus and church. It is evolving again into a more authentically worked through spiritual experience where I am moving into a new relationship with God. This has been an important experience for me and I believe that here lies a crucial part of the therapeutic relationship which I discuss in the following chapter. In therapy I have had the space to explore my spiritual growth and this has been extremely grounding for me, an experience which then reflects in my other relationships with my husband, friendships and family.

Perhaps the compensatory hypothesis also offers hope of healing through an attachment to God. I will explore this in the following chapter on applying this research into best practice for therapists working with Christians using attachment theory as a framework.

Pregnancy.

During the writing of this dissertation I have become pregnant and will complete my work just before the baby is born. It has been an interesting layer to explore in my own process, and as I have grown in my attachment to the baby growing in me, I have felt the impact of another life being dependant on me and what this will mean. I have noticed my distraction as the baby moves and explores life inside my womb. At times my distraction at my baby's movements has meant a loss of focus on what I am writing, but I also think it has deepened my reflection of what it means to be attached to my own mother, father and God.

Suddenly the attachment process between (in my case) mother and daughter has become more present psychologically as I have grappled in my mind with thoughts which oscillate between anxiety and excitement. I have at times felt disconnected from this dissertation as my therapist and I focus on feathering the nest

internally while my husband and I create a physical space for another human being to become part of our family. However I also think that it has added depth to my final reflections of the complexity of attachment, which has in turn added to a more integrated understanding of the two theories of correspondence and compensation.

Summary

This chapter has summarised the findings of research which attempted to understand the differences in religiousness among individuals. I have outlined the two main theories proposed by Kirkpatrick: compensation and correspondence, integrating others' findings which have added to the body of literature which attempts to conceptualise how one relates to God. The concept of "internal working models" has been included in the correspondence theory as it has helped to differentiate between different attachment styles.

While it may appear that the two theories are contradictory and may cancel each other out, I have outlined how Kirkpatrick, in his later work, has integrated the two seemingly opposing hypotheses. I agree with this integration as it has helped me to understand my own relationship with God. It reflects the complexity of human relationships and of humans' relationship with God.

Chapter 5: Summary, Implications for Best Practice and Conclusion

Summary of what has been Discussed

In this dissertation I have reviewed research and literature which explores the question of whether attachment theory can offer an understanding of how adults relate to God, specifically a Christian God.

The biggest contribution to this question has been provided by Kirkpatrick & Shaver in 1990, and following studies conducted by Kirkpatrick in 1992, 1998 and 2005, research which offers two hypotheses. The first is the correspondence hypothesis which suggests that attachment patterns which are set by a primary caregiver early in age then translate and correspond to the same attachment style in adult life.

The alternate hypothesis which is provided is the compensation hypothesis. This theory offers another explanation that God can be a surrogate attachment figure from which an individual can experience an ideal attachment relationship. Kirkpatrick believes that this hypothesis is particularly relevant for those with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style as opposed to secure or avoidant.

Disorganised attachment.

What needs to be addressed here is that neither hypothesis address a disorganised attachment style. I proposed in chapter one that this is due to the fact that disorganised attachment was a relatively new concept around the time that Kirkpatrick and Shaver were conducting their research. There is now room for this fourth attachment style to be explored. Following the thinking of a direct correlation between a child's attachment style to a primary caregiver and an adult's attachment to God, one could hypothesise that for those with a disorganised attachment style, they

would also relate to God in an inconsistent way, being avoidant towards Him or confused about how to relate and attach. However, future research is needed to address the question of how those with a disorganised attachment relate to God.

Implications for Best Practice

It is proposed in the Psychotherapist Board of Aotearoa New Zealand's Core Clinical Competencies, that a therapist be "able to engage with the client" which means that the therapist needs to be able to reflect on their own spiritual beliefs, not dismiss the client's experience. This is why I believe in the validity of exploring what the research implications are for psychotherapists in working with spirituality.

The therapeutic relationship.

In speaking with a few Christians about psychotherapy, it appears that one view is that therapy can be seen as frightening for some as they fear that their beliefs will get challenged or ridiculed. However, despite Freud's premise of God being a 'crutch' studies have shown the importance of a secure relationship with God in increasing a sense of well being, lowering anxiety levels and a reduction of psychological symptoms. This was shown in a study by Cheston, Piedmont, Eanes and Lavin (2003), through a course of outpatient therapy. These researchers suggest that there is a strong and important relationship between psychological symptoms and a clients' spiritual self. They even go on to state that bringing God image into the therapeutic space is important for predicting psychological well-being over time (p. 10). Their data shows that there is a relationship between God image and psychological symptoms, which therefore makes spirituality a topic which cannot be ignored if a person is bring their whole self into the therapy room.

Of course this is just one study, and there has been research to suggest that religious affiliation can be detrimental to mental health Richards and Bergin (2005)

(as cited in Reinhart, Edwards and Hendrix, 2009) list four strategies which provide some guidelines for therapists working with clients who have a religious affiliation:

- a) Seek education or supervision;
- b) Discuss dual relationships with client and the implications of collaborating with religious authority or not collaborating with them;
- c) Never impose religious values onto the client; and
- d) Be aware of own religious viewpoint and beliefs.

These practical points help to establish a working alliance between therapist and client in which to then explore attachment issues. Without the working alliance, understanding a client's attachment patterns would be very difficult.

Establishing a working alliance allows therapists an influential role in a client's spiritual journey. "Therefore, the client-counsellor relationship not only sets the stage in the counselling process ... but sustains the therapeutic efforts through the subsequent working stage and the termination phase" (Reinhart, 2009, p. 119).

Bowlby (1979) believes that even though attachments are formed within the first few months and remain stable, they can be adjusted or modified to a degree through subsequent relationships. Does this mean then that it can be viewed as a gift that the therapist can be in the position of helping the client to experience a new attachment relationship that can then translate to their "outside" world of relationships? Reinhart believes so, suggesting that by becoming an attachment figure, therapists have the chance to model a more balanced view of God. Within psychodynamic psychotherapy this could be modeled through encouraging the client to question their black and white thinking around their belief system. This questioning could be demonstrated from the mentalization (Bateman & Fonegy, 2006) model, that through having a curious stance the therapist could help the client to expand their internal

working models around who God is and slowly encourage a more enveloping view of Him.

For a therapist who did not share the client's spirituality, I believe that this stance could still be applicable, as having a curiosity into a different belief system could help the client to explore their relationship with God in just as much depth. However, the client would need to trust that the therapist would not judge or ridicule the client for their beliefs. A curious stance, however, could help move the client from an ideal God image to a worked through more authentic, close relationship with Him. "Spiritual caregivers can challenge unrealistic expectations for a perfectly disciplined relationship and affirm the counselee's growth and acceptance of a relationship that includes closeness and distance." (Reinhart, 2009, p. 123). Perhaps through challenging the client's interactions with human relationships and fears of intimacy, the therapist can provide a new relational experience in the hope that this will in turn help the individual's relationship with God and others. Once a maladaptive internal working model of relationship is transformed into something more adaptive, this adaptation influences every relationship we have, including that with God.

Within this powerful position that the therapists holds, what also needs to be understood in therapy is an individual's possibly differing relationships with different spiritual figures also needs to be understood in therapy. For instance how one attaches to God the Father may be different to how they relate to Jesus, or the Church. This difference can be worked with in therapy, and will assist the therapist in understanding a client's internal working models. For instance, God may represent a persons' attachment to their father and Jesus may represent how they relate to their

mother. All information could assist the therapist in working with the client with a deeper understanding of the individual's relationship pattern (Kirkpatrick, 1998).

In addition, the type of religious encounters, either experienced or sought by clients can be an indication of attachment style. For instance a therapist may understand the client as having an insecure attachment dynamic if they have reported a religious conversion, affectively charged religious experiences, or are seeking religious experiences that are quite different than the parents. Of course these conclusions seem to align more with a belief that God is a "crutch" in surviving life stressors. While this could be true, this dissertation is seeking to understand a person's relationship to God, which like any relationship can be fraught with insecurities.

Implications for Psychotherapeutic Interventions

Therapists have the unique position of creating a space for the client which they (the client) may never have previously experienced. What this means is that it is within the physical context of this environment that a therapeutic relationship can form where the client ideally experiences a secure base and safe haven to which they can return in times of emotional distress. It is within this relationship dynamic that therapists can help nurture within the client a secure internal working model of a relationship with God. "As a substitute attachment figure, he or she can explore how the client views God, relates to God, and believes that God sees him or her" (Eckert & Kimball, 2003, p. 123).

So, why is it important to think about religious orientation? Rienhart (2009) stated that it is ethical for the therapist to think about their own spiritual beliefs, for instance, whether they have any at all, or if they believe that they need to "convert" others. This study recommends that self-knowledge and an awareness of their own attachment styles as reflected in their childhood, adult and God relationships, is

perhaps the most important task.

Florence (2009) states that “whatever theoretical view of God is considered, and whatever the religious orientation of the therapist, the literature notes that training in religious issues for psychotherapists is negligible” (p. 70). What this suggests is that, rightly or wrongly, it is up to the therapist to seek out their own education on their spiritual beliefs. Florence also notes that this lack of education could mean that therapists are not aware of the latest research findings on working with spirituality.

Strategies that can be Implemented for the Correspondence and Compensation Hypotheses

Correspondence hypothesis.

When working with an individual with an avoidant attachment style it is important to be aware of the client beginning to experience a warm intimacy with the therapist and move away from being fearful, distant and avoidant of painful feelings, which might in turn encourage the client to view God in a similar way. The therapist could encourage a client to engage in spiritual practices which foster this relationship and help develop a new way of attaching and relating to God. It is my understanding that in psychodynamic therapy, the internal change wrought in the therapy relationship, translates to changes in other relationships which are initiated by the client and it seems to me that the internal changes brought about by the client’s use of the therapist most often causes changes in how a client relates to God. This can cause anxiety, especially if a client changes his/her style of relating to God, a particular style which may be endorsed from the pulpit. For example, a client no longer feels the inclination to read the bible or have a quiet time, prescriptive activities which are often seen as a “benchmark” of a Christian’s spiritual “health”. This can cause conflict in the client and needs to be ‘held’ sensitively as they progress to a more

secure, internally located 'sense of being' with God which may lead to a client experiencing closeness with God when walking on the beach.

The strategies that may come from the pulpit for deepening a closer relationship to God need to be treated carefully and sensitively from the therapist to the client so that the client doesn't feel overwhelmed, especially if their attachment style is insecure. As psychodynamic psychotherapy focuses on the relationship between therapist and client as a point from which other relationships can evolve from, to challenge the prescriptive strategies it could be difficult if subsequent guilt is felt by the client for seeking alternate paths toward God. The therapist needs to be aware of how time is needed to process the guilt or confusion of the client and support them in taking as much time as they need to develop a relationship with God which fits them. However, the encouragement from the therapist to express anxieties about this intimacy could be helpful and useful in helping the client to then relate to others with more intimacy.

If the therapist is not a Christian then they may not understand how what appears to be a small shift in the client's way of relating to God, can actually be hugely significant. It is important that the therapist is aware that if the client allows themselves to 'be' with God differently this is not a small thing and they are effectively going against the grain of church culture, and need to be therapeutically supported in this transition.

Compensation hypothesis.

For those who have a belief in God and an insecure attachment style, Reinhart suggests that the therapist could encourage them to move more towards managing their uncomfortable feelings through this relationship with God. He suggests that this could be done with the intention of the therapist withdrawing slightly, so that God has

the opportunity to become a compensatory replacement for the therapist. What this makes me wonder, however, is whether or not the client could feel this as withholding from therapist, a pattern which could replicate old attachment dynamics in early childhood from the client's parents. This is an interesting suggestion and one which I believe could be useful to keep in awareness when working with a Christian client, however, the therapist needs to think about this carefully in supervision and this strategy could perhaps be implemented in the final stages of therapy.

The therapist could, however, use the relationship with God as a way of promoting autonomy and confidence in coping with life's difficulties and emotional distress. If the client has a belief in a relationship with God the therapist could help promote God as a safe haven or secure base – this would follow the theory of God as a compensatory attachment figure (Miner, 2009). Miner suggests that a secure attachment to God may be associated with a sense of well being and lower anxiety levels, indicating that therapeutically it could be very valuable to work with a client's relationship to God if the client has indicated that God is an attachment figure. More broadly, this shows that it is important to take into account one's spiritual attachment as something that can influence psychological adjustment.

How does the therapist engage with the client's spiritual life?

Miner suggests that to enhance a positive attachment to God in both the correspondence and compensation hypothesis, the therapist could implement these factors:

- Talking about positive interactions with God while amplifying the associations an individual has around these experiences.
- Exploring one's beliefs, attitudes and expectations around their relationship with God.

- Discussing attachment needs and goals.
- Developing strategies for accessing the desired degree of relatedness to God during emotionally distressing times.

I also suggest that if there is a more formal assessment period, the therapist is active in asking the client about their spiritual beliefs. This allows room for the clients to then feel comfortable about discussing their thoughts and feelings about their spirituality as it has been named from the start as a topic of value. There is research to support the fact that clients do feel as though the subject can be discussed if it is mentioned in assessment.

Holy Spirit as counselor.

Earlier in the dissertation I discussed the use of language in the NIV translation of the bible where the Holy Spirit is named as a counsellor or sibling. In this translation one interpretation states that “When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me,”(John 15:26) suggesting that the Holy Spirit's role is an advocate for Jesus, and known as a counsellor. In another scripture, the language used is that the Holy Spirit is an advocate for us, “The Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16)

The suggestion that the Holy Spirit could be likened to a counsellor has a few implications for therapy. If this view is from the client's perspective, I question how it would affect the client's allegiance supposedly to God (Trinity), would they feel as though they were being disloyal by talking to another counsellor? This could cause

conflict for the client, guilt and resistance to fully engaging in a therapeutic relationship, “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

Critique of Methodology Conducted on the Correspondence and Compensation

Hypothesis

It is important to note that with the research which has been provided in this dissertation there are a few limitations which need to be stated before best practice can be explored. Firstly, in Kirkpatrick’s most significant studies (1990 & 1998), the data collection instrument that was used in the research method was a self-reporting survey because the sample was gained through a newspaper’s advertisement for participants which may have resulted in selection bias. What this means is that memories are the main tool from which information is drawn, people’s personal experiences and their own subjective viewpoint. My question from this is could the interpretation of findings be influenced by researcher’s own religious orientation.

While the subjectiveness of the information can be a limitation, it is also very important as we can capture the emotional quality of ones relationship with God and what is represented is a very small piece of a very large picture. Seeking to understand the psychology of human beings spiritual journey is something that we can only glimpse.

What the information does provide us with, however, is a very interesting glimpse into a uniquely private relationship. I feel that with the lack of support in training about working with clients and their spirituality, this very small amount is at least a start in awareness and working towards best practice.

Suggestions for Further Research

At the conclusion of my research I ask the question about what this means for psychotherapy and spirituality more generally. If a therapist is confronted with a

client who has a personal relationship with a higher being are the research findings of Kirkpatrick and Shaver relevant? Does attachment theory translate for those who are Buddhist, Maori or Muslim? I am aware that the Buddhist philosophy of mindfulness is used more widely within psychotherapy, but beyond this practice of accepting the moment, what does it mean if the client brings before the therapist their confusing relationship with Buddha?

My speculations about these questions show that there is so much room for further research to be done, in order to build upon the hypotheses provided in this dissertation. Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) acknowledge this need and state that “there are persuasive theoretical reasons to pursue the implications of attachment for religious belief and involvement beyond evangelical Christianity” (p. 331).

Conclusion

This study primarily offers two hypotheses which suggest how individuals relate to God formed by researchers Kirkpatrick and Shaver. The correspondence hypothesis was developed initially and thought to reinforce the notion that an individual's attachment to God will correspond to their attachment to a primary caregiver. Further research highlighted another trend which led to the development of the compensation hypothesis. This was mainly focused on those with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style where God became a compensatory attachment figure, reinforcing Bowlby's belief in the power of a surrogate attachment.

Initially Kirkpatrick believed that the hypotheses were in conflict with each other. However, in his later work he proposed that they could be integrated and highlight the complexities of human nature. “The relationship between attachment history and religious belief is not simple” (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 2001, p. 328), just as nothing about the human condition is simple.

I believe that the findings and research are merely scratching the surface of a hugely complex dynamic between human being and God, however, this scratch is important as an opening up of the questions which therapists need to ponder in their practice. In the beginning it was my hope that conclusion of this dissertation would not be to provide any concrete answers, but more to highlight to the reader the depth and complexity of the relational dynamic between human and God, and the importance that this relationship can have within the therapeutic space.

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