

How Attachment Styles Affect the Way Humans Relate to God

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In a podcast entitled “Our Attachments to Each Other and to God” on the CXMH Podcast, a therapist by the name of Krispin Mayfield shared how people relate to God and how we try to “get close” to God. Delight is the key. We look for delight in our parents and in people, and some struggle to feel delighted by God, “We will do anything to find connection to others...there is trauma in disconnection...we will do whatever it takes to find connection... we are trained to be close to God where it is exhausting and unhelpful” (Oxhandler et al.). In other words, since we are meant to connect, the way we connect is a topic of concern. How does one’s attachment style affect the way one relates to God? Originally, the intention of this research was to find the prevalence that attachment has on all people with any higher power relationship. However, the research I did find was mostly related to attachment to the Christian God. Many of the studies were done at a Christian Universities, specifically with people in graduate level education. Ages of participants in all of the research ranged from 18-91. In all of the research, race ranged from European, Asian, Hispanic, African, and Native American. Participants identified as either Methodist, Non-Denominational, Baptist, Catholic, Nazarene, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and many other denominations. One study was based in Graz, Austria who had a Roman Catholic upbringing. There was also a study that was used that surveyed people who identified as atheist, secular, and other free thought organizations (John Marriott et al., 2019). Finding the relevance for this topic can pose as a threat to the beauty of social work; what I mean is that the intentions must be clear and intentional. As social workers, it is our role to ensure that our own beliefs and values are not forced upon our clients. However, I think this topic is relevant to our work because social workers may encounter clients who do want to discuss their relationship with a higher power. Understanding the implications that attachment can have on this type of relationship can help social workers and clients

determine if their doctrine of who God is lines up with how they see and relate to God. When I heard this podcast, I immediately knew that I wanted to study it more because I could relate to it in some ways. Although I have a secure attachment with my parents, I find that I have an anxious attachment with friends and with God. I feel like I am a mistake away from being underserving of their love. It can be detrimental to people to have this mindset because it can cause them to relate to God and people in ways that are unproductive. Since eight in ten people identify with some religious group, this topic is prevalent to many people (2022).

How Attachment Styles Develop

The attachment style model was developed by John Bowlby. He asserted that emotional bonding begins at infancy. It has been shown to influence the ways in which people regulate emotions. (Brock et al, 2018). The attachment style also plays a role in relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that people experience (John Marriot, et al 2019). Depending on the child's early interpersonal relationships, they can develop relational patterns of either secure, anxious, and avoidant attachments (John Marriot, et al 2019). These attachments can affect one's day to day interactions and regulates psychological and physiological development (Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2016). The attachment that is developed at childhood does play a role in adult attachment behaviors. Research conducted by Bartholomew and Horowitz discovered that the way the mom experienced attachment as a child can predict how they will interact with their own child, which in turn can affect the child's attachment in the future. (Anderson-Mooney et al., 2015). The correspondence hypothesis, developed by Beck and McDonald, suggests that a child develops a sense of God based on their attachment to their first relationships in childhood (Anderson-Mooney et al., 2015). For instance, a child who views their parents as authoritative will more than likely view God as also being an authoritarian figure (Tung et al., 2017). Furthermore,

these attachments relating to God were more likely due to their attachment to mothers (Dansby et al., 2017).

Insecure attachment Style

Children with insecure attachment style have ways of coping with this attachment; In order to receive their needs, they either resort to minimizing or amplifying their needs (Bock et al., 2018).

People with insecure attachment style view the world as unsafe and unreliable. Consequently, they were found to possess the belief that God and others are not reliable, do not value them, and do not love them. This can cause people with this attachment to feel as though their life is meaningless and unfulfilling (Bock et al., 2018). A study conducted by Schmidt and colleagues found that cancer survivors who had a secure attachment style were able to use religion and other “meaning making” coping strategies more than those with insecure attachment styles (Bock et al., 2018).

Anxious Attachment Style

Anxious attachment style causes one to fear the loss of an important figure in their life. They feel as though they will be abandoned at any moment (John Marriott et al., 2019). According to Bock and colleagues, people with an anxious attachment style with God do not view worldly suffering as something that is meant for growth and a way to grow in their relationship with God. They are also more apt to feel abandoned by God and feel as though God is unreliable. Furthermore, it is suggested that those with anxious attachment struggle to form relationships with God and religious individuals because of past hurt and disappointments, which can cause one to not believe in God. Those with anxious adult attachments have been found to have similar beliefs about their relationship with God. (Sandage et al., 2015). Consequently, people with anxious

attachment to God have been found to have an association with “increased frequency of psychiatric symptoms” (Tung et al., 2017).

Avoidant Attachment Style

Avoidant attachment style causes one to feel as though they can trust no one with their emotions, so they attempt to become independent so as not to require the help of interpersonal relationships (John Marriott et al., 2019). In one study, avoidant attachment was linked to agnosticism, due to the fact that this belief is centered around the idea that God is distant and controlling (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). When studying specifically how avoidant God relationships operate, it was found that they show less awareness to their spiritual, social, physical, and emotional states, and are less likely to take action when those needs are missing in their lives (Bock et al., 2018).

Trauma

In a study conducted by the church of Sweden, eight participants who had been sexually abused in the past and identity as Christians were surveyed. They were asked questions about how they perceived God after their traumatic event. It was found that all of them indicated that it changed how they believed in God. The participants stressed that they needed people and the congregation because it helped them with personal development. Most conveyed that they needed to create their own understanding of Christian symbols because they felt doubt or a disconnect with how sermons, hymns, and stories were portrayed in church. Due to this, they felt more alienated from people in the congregation. Some participants felt as though they had to change their personal image of God. Although some stopped attending church services, most decided to continue church going, though it caused some pain and feelings of exclusion. Most participants described that they feel unseen and unnoticed in church settings rather than

validated. The feelings surrounding the abuse were described as anger, disappointment, and abandonment. However, it was indicated that although they felt this abandonment and exclusion, they still longed for a connection with God and a sense of purpose (Rudolfsson & Tidefors, 2014).

Secure Attachment Style

Those with secure attachments styles had a greater sense of meaning and purpose (Bock et al., 2018). People that have had positive and secure interpersonal relationships have a more “stable and loving God image” (John Marriott). It also can cause one to have a strong sense of security in their relationship with God. It was also found that women, in particular, had a greater self-concept and love for oneself when they had a perception of a loving and accepting God (J. Homan & A. Lemmon, 2015). Secure attachment is linked to greater religious/spiritual wellbeing (Hiebler-Ragger et al., 2016). It is interesting to see how secure attachment not only affects their interpersonal relationships, but also their own personal self-concept and God concept.

Through this research, it was found that there is a correlation between attachment styles and how one relates to God. It was found that those with an anxious attachment style felt that they were abandoned by God. In avoidant attachment, it was found that agnosticism was linked to this attachment due to the idea that God is distant and does not involve in each individual’s life. Secure attachment was linked to having a loving image of God. My findings were a bit limited due to the fact that the research was personal questionnaires and therefore subjective. Research was also done with people mostly in higher education, which begs the question of whether educational background or socioeconomics plays a role in attachment. I also found that the majority of research was done in the US and in college contexts. Although I was not surprised by my findings, I did find that I was uneasy with my findings. I struggled to understand

whether this was even a topic worth researching if it would actually end up being discouraging for those with insecure attachment styles. I think the tension appears with whether people who were raised with a certain attachment style have a “chance” at having a secure relationship with a higher power. My suggestions for churches and for faith-based communities based on the research is to understand that every person needs connection. How we connect to them can either affirm their attachment or go against it. As Krispin Mayfield on the CXMH podcast suggested, the way in which leaders speak to God or about God should be intentional. Are the ways in which we discuss the love of God based on how much we sin, or about unconditional love? He suggests that we can model love and secure attachment by the way we communicate to others in the congregation or how we even talk to God. For social workers, this research can encourage them to not be fearful to discuss peoples higher power relationships if that is something that is important in their clients’ lives. Since so many people associate with some type of religious group, it may be a topic that comes up in therapy, and social workers should feel comfortable to discuss it with their clients if they choose to do so. I think future research on how attachment styles can change would be beneficial so people know that regardless of how they were raised, they can develop a secure relationship with a higher power.

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