The God Attachment Interview Schedule

Implicit and explicit assessment of attachment to God

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Set within an attachment theory developmental perspective, the thesis explored attachment to God as a psychological construct, both theoretically and as experienced within individual Christians’ relationships with God. Human attachment as conceptualized by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth was used as a metaphor for examining attachment to God (Ainsworth 1985a, 1985b, 1989, 1991; Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980; Main et al. 2000, 1995, 1987, etc.). The God Attachment Interview Schedule (GAIS) was developed using the Adult Attachment Interview and scoring procedures as a somewhat loose theoretical framework, in order to assess individuals’ implicit attachment to God representations, that is, their attachment to God ‘states of mind’ (George, Kaplan & Main 1984, 1985, 1996; Hesse, 1999). GAIS scoring procedures and the God Attachment Behaviour Scales (GABS) were also developed, the GABS used to assess individuals’ perceptions of God functioning as an attachment figure.

Thirty-one predominately Australian born individuals, ranging in age from 18 to 77 years (mean age of 39.5 years) of Catholic and Protestant denominational affiliations, participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. They responded to questions about their relationship with God. The dual focus of the interview process was to identify (i) whether individual Christians experienced God functioning as an attachment figure, and (ii) whether aspects of their relationship with God were able to identified as attachment experiences, in a manner consistent with theoretical propositions initially outlined by Lee Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 1999a, 1999b, 1998, 1997a, 1997b, 1995, 1994, 1992; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992, 1990).

Three types of analyses were conducted. An initial a-theoretical thematic analysis identified extensive general attachment themes within participants’ broader relationship with God experiences, establishing prima facie validity for the construct ‘attachment to God’. Further analysis, using a theoretically-derived classificatory system (set out within an attachment development perspective) provided support for hypothesized secure and insecure ‘attachment to God’ profile indicators. Findings suggested that the ‘attachment to God’ construct was more complex than previously understood, suggestive of an underlying developmental progression. Finally, the application of the GAIS conversational discourse scoring procedures is presented in the form of two case studies. These case studies reveal that individuals’ attachment to God ‘states of mind’ could be assessed using the GAIS. Methodological challenges experienced in using the GAIS scoring procedures, along with recommendations regarding the future development and scoring of the GAIS and the GABS are presented. Findings are discussed in relation to debates concerning ‘implicit’ versus ‘explicit’ features of attachment to God, and developmental features including ‘correspondence’ and ‘compensatory’ hypotheses.