

# Attachment to God and Parents: Testing the Correspondence vs. Compensation Hypotheses

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The relationship between early caregiver experiences and attachment to God was explored in the current study. Using the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) developed by Beck and McDonald, the relationship between parent-child attachment and attachment to God was explored among a college population. In addition, parental spirituality and religious emphases in the home were investigated. Comparisons of the AGI with parent-child attachment measures support a correspondence between working models of parents and God. Respondents that reported coming from homes that were emotionally cold or unspiritual exhibited higher levels of avoidance of intimacy in their relationship to God, a trend consistent with a Dismissing attachment style. Overprotective, rigid, or authoritarian homes were associated with higher levels of both avoidance of intimacy and anxiety over lovability in relationship to God, a trend characterized by the Fearful attachment style.

Attachment theory is widely accepted as a broad encompassing model of psychosocial and emotional development. Recent work (Granqvist, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; TenElshof & Furrow, 2000) has suggested that attachment theory may be an appropriate framework for a believer's relationship with a God figure. The question of whether one's attachment to God resembles other attachment relationships has generated a wealth of research but has recently gained new impetus with the introduction of a direct measure of attachment to God, the Attachment to God Inventory (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Prior to this time, other religiosity measures or single-item/brief measures have been used to assess attachment to God. Now that the measure is available, attachment to God questions can be addressed more directly. In the current study, the association between parent-child attachment and attachment to God was explored.

## **Attachment to God and the "Correspondence versus Compensation Hypothesis"**

Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) theorized that the early attachment bond formed internal working models through repeated daily experiences with caregivers and that these working models serve as a guideline for future social interactions throughout the lifespan. Some of the hallmarks

of the attachment relationship are believed to be visible in behaviors toward the attachment figure: seeking and maintaining proximity, serving as a secure base of explorative behavior, providing a haven of safety, and experiencing anxiety when separated (Ainsworth, 1985). Kirkpatrick (1999) cited evidence for the existence of these hallmark attachment behaviors in relationship with God. Among these attachment behaviors are viewing God as close in proximity through prayer and the belief that God is omnipresent. In summary, it has been asserted that a believer's personal relationship with God serves similar functions to other human attachment relationships.

Two outcomes have been posed in the literature regarding the relationship between working models of attachment and attachment to God: compensation and correspondence. The compensation hypothesis states that the relationship to God can compensate for deficient caregiver and/or adult romantic bonds. The correspondence hypothesis states that the attachment style an individual has will be consistent across types of bonds: caregivers, lovers, and God. Evidence supporting both sides of the hypothesis has been found.

In support of the compensatory role, in two longitudinal studies, Kirkpatrick (1997, 1998) found insecurely attached adults were more likely to later report a conversion experience. Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) found support for the compensation hypothesis, but only for individuals raised in nonreligious homes. Among respondents with nonreligious mothers, avoidant parental attachments were associated with higher

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levels of religiousness while the respondents with secure attachments showed lower levels of religiousness. For those that were raised in religious homes, attachment style was unrelated to adult religiousness. In a study by Granqvist (1998), respondents who reported insecure attachment bonds to parents exhibited a greater increase in importance of religious beliefs as adults than those who reported secure bonds with their parents.

Other researchers have found greater evidence for the correspondence hypothesis. In a study by TenElshof and Furrow (2000), secure attachment styles were correlated with faith maturity. In a series of studies (Brokaw & Edwards, 1994; Hall & Brokaw, 1995; Hall, Brokaw, Edwards, & Pike, 1998) assessing a concept similar to Bowlby's working models, Object Relations theory, evidence for correspondence can be seen. Collectively, these studies found mature object relations development was positively associated with spiritual maturity. In addition, this work found a correspondence between relationships with caregivers and images of God. Looking specifically at attachment to God, Beck and McDonald (2004) found modest support for correspondence between working models of romantic others and attachment to God.

In a study by Granqvist and Hagekull (2000), evidence for both compensation and correspondence was obtained. In support of correspondence, a positive relationship between adult attachment style and a personal relationship with God was found. In the same study, singles, as compared to lovers, were more active religiously, more likely to perceive a personal relationship with God, and more likely to have made changes indicative of an increased importance of religious beliefs.

Looking at this evidence cumulatively, it seems clear that support exists for both compensation and correspondence. The manner in which religious attachment has been assessed varies greatly across these studies. The majority of the studies that have found in favor of compensation have assessed some type of behavioral manifestation of religiosity, such as religious conversion or participation in religious activities. These behavioral indicators may differ from the experience of a relationship with God. It has been suggested (Beck & McDonald, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1997) that individuals with insecure bonds may be more likely to seek out God through conversion and religious involvement (compensation).

Yet once in the relationship with God, the working models exert their influence (correspondence). Therefore, both compensation and correspondence may be correct for the manner in which the question is being framed. Drawing from the studies that assess experience with God, it was predicted that the evidence for correspondence would be greater between attachment to parents and God in the current study.

#### ***Parental Bonds and Attachment to God***

As mentioned previously, Beck and McDonald (2004) explored the correspondence between attachment styles in adult romantic relationships and to God, using an adulthood love relationship inventory to assess general attachment style. However, it has been suggested that parental bonds may serve a closer parallel to religious attachment than romantic attachment style. Specifically, God imagery appears to be rooted in paternal and maternal caregiving images (Brokaw & Edwards, 1994; Dickie et al., 1997; Hall & Brokaw, 1995; Hall et al., 1998; Justice & Lambert, 1986; Nelson, 1971). Images of God the Father and God as loving and protective stand out in many Judeo-Christian faiths. Dickie et al. (1997) found that when parents were perceived as nurturing and powerful, children perceived God as possessing the same characteristics. Justice and Lambert (1986) found a correlation between images adults used to describe their fathers and God, and those who had the most negative views of their parents also had the most negative views of God. Furthermore, adult romantic relationships differ in at least two ways from parent-child or believer-God relationships: they are more symmetrical and possess a sexual element missing from the latter two bond types. Therefore, the current study sought to investigate the relationship between the perceived parent-child bond and attachment to God.

Parental bonds also have been shown to influence God images and religious development. In an extensive review of 16 years of literature, Benson, Donahue, and Erickson (1989) concluded that parents are one of the strongest influences on religiosity among adolescents. In a study of parenting style and adolescent religious commitment, Giesbrecht (1995) found an authoritative parenting style was related to adolescent intrinsic religious commitment and a permissive parenting style was related to an extrinsic social religious commitment. In another study, authoritative parents, more so than authoritarian or per-

missive parents, were found to be most likely to have children with similar religious values to their own (Clark, Worthington, & Danser, 1988). Finally, Gnaulati and Heine (1997) found religiosity in young adulthood was associated with maternal bonding.

This study sought to examine the relationship between parental spirituality and attachment to God. It was hypothesized that parental spirituality and religious emphases in the home would correlate with college students' attachment to God. In addition, it was believed that the working models of parental and God attachment would exhibit a greater trend toward correspondence than compensation. The Attachment to God Inventory allowed for the exploration of two dimensions of attachment: Anxiety over lovability and Avoidance of intimacy in relationship to God.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

There were 101 respondents in this study, most of whom were undergraduate students at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 27 years old ( $M = 19.92$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ). The gender breakdown was 76 females and 23 males. The vast majority, 95 of the students, were single; only 1 was married, and 2 were divorced or separated. Ethnicity of the sample was as follows: 77.6% Caucasian, 9.9% African American, 6.9% Hispanic American, and 3.0% Asian American. Religious affiliation of the respondents included: 60.4% Church of Christ, 14.9% Non-denominational, 5.0% Baptist, 4.0% Catholic, 3.0% Methodist, 2.0% Episcopalian, and 2.0% Lutheran. Course credit was offered for participation.

### *Measures*

Six instruments were used in the data collection for this study: Attachment to God Inventory (Beck & McDonald, 2004), Religious Emphasis Scale (Altemeyer, 1988), Parental Spirituality Scale (constructed by authors), Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979), Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales-III (Olson, 1986), and Parental Attachment Questionnaire (Kenny, 1987). Below is a brief description of each instrument.

*Attachment to God Inventory (AGI)* is a 28-item scale based on the *Experiences in Close Relationships Scale*, developed by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998). It contains 14 items on the Anxiety subscale (Cronbach alpha of .82 with the

current sample), and 14 items on the Avoidance subscale (Cronbach alpha of .83). Examples of the anxiety items are: "I often worry about whether God is pleased with me." and "I fear God does not accept me when I do wrong." Examples of the avoidance items are: "I prefer not to depend too much on God." and "I just don't feel a deep need to be close to God." The AGI demonstrated good factor structure and construct validity in a multiple sample study (see Beck & McDonald, 2004, for a fuller discussion of the development and validation of the AGI).

The *Religious Emphasis Scale* is a 10-item scale (Cronbach alpha of .89) that requires respondents to rate whether a variety of religious activities, such as attending church, reading scripture, prayer, and youth group participation, were emphasized in their home. Each religious activity is measured on a scale of 0-5, with anchors of "no emphasis" to "a very strong emphasis."

The *Parental Spirituality Scale* is a brief, 7-item scale that assesses parental spirituality (4 items) and parental hypocrisy (3 items) in parallel maternal (Cronbach alpha of .92 for spirituality; .80 for hypocrisy) and paternal (Cronbach alpha of .96 for spirituality; .85 for hypocrisy) forms. Sample items include "My mother had a deep relationship with God" and "My mother's behavior was consistent with her religious beliefs."

The *Parental Bonding Instrument* is a retrospective measure of fundamental parenting styles of each parent during the first 16 years of life. It has both mother and father forms. There are two subscales: Care, consisting of 12 items that measure parental warmth and affection (Cronbach alpha of .91) and Overprotection, consisting of 13 items that measure parental control and intrusion versus encouragement of autonomy (Cronbach alpha of .83).

The *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales-III (FACES-III)* has two subscales, a 10-item Adaptability scale (Cronbach of .91) that measures rigid versus flexible communication patterns and family rules, and a 10-item Cohesion scale (Cronbach of .73) that measures togetherness versus autonomous patterns of family closeness and intimacy.

The *Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ)* is a 70-item self report measure. The PAQ contains three subscales: Affective Quality of Relationships (Cronbach alpha of .95), Parents as Facilitators of Independence (Cronbach alpha of .82), and Parents as Source of Support (Cronbach alpha of .84).

**Table 1**  
*Zero-order correlations between Parental Spirituality and Hypocrisy ratings with Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) subscales*

Parental Spirituality Measures:	AGI-Avoidance	AGI-Anxiety
Religious Emphasis Scale	-.32**	.10
Mother Spirituality	-.18*	.12
Mother Hypocrisy	.17	.11
Father Spirituality	-.26**	-.06
Father Hypocrisy	.26**	.17

\**p* < .05    \*\**p* < .01

### Results

#### *Preliminaries*

The Religious Emphasis Scale, Parental Spirituality ratings, and the Parental Hypocrisy ratings were all significantly skewed (the first two negatively and the latter positively) indicating that the sample was very homogenous, with the majority of respondents reporting very religious home environments. This trend is typical of the Abilene Christian University campus. To cope with the skewed scores, transformed data were compared with the original data. No differences were noted in the results, so the original scores were used throughout.

#### *Parental Spirituality and Attachment to God*

Zero-order correlation coefficient statistics for the AGI and parental spirituality measures are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, homes that emphasized religious practices were associated with college-age children who reported being able to rely upon God in an intimate way (i.e., low attachment Avoidance). Paralleling this trend, Father Spirituality and Mother Spirituality ratings were also associated with God Avoidance. Specifically, respondents with unspiritual parents reported greater difficulty relying upon or being intimate with God. Finally, Father Hypocrisy ratings were also associated with greater God Avoidance. In sum, with these college-age respondents, spirituality in the home appeared to be related to greater reliance on and intimacy with God.

#### *Parental Attachment and Attachment to God*

Zero-order correlations between the parental attachment measures and the AGI are presented in Table 2. Grouping the subscales that assessed parental care and affection (PBI-Maternal and Paternal Care, FACES-III Cohesion, PAQ-Affective

Quality of Relationships, and PAQ-Parents as Source of Support) revealed a clear overall trend: a perceived lack of parental warmth, tenderness, or support was associated with greater God Avoidance.

Trends were also observed across subscales assessing parental authoritarianism and overprotection (PBI-Maternal and Paternal Overprotection, FACES-III Adaptability, and PAQ-Parents as Facilitators of Independence). Specifically, both PBI-Maternal and Paternal Overprotection ratings were positively associated with AGI-Anxiety scores, indicating that respondents with authoritarian parents were more likely to report concerns over lovability with God with associated fears of abandonment. Further, PBI-Paternal Overprotection ratings were associated with God Avoidance. That is, respondents with authoritarian fathers also reported greater difficulty relying upon and being intimate with God. An alternative way to frame this trend is that authoritarian mothers appeared to produce Preoccupied God attachment styles (high anxiety), whereas authoritarian fathers appeared to produce Fearful God attachments (high anxiety *and* high avoidance). These trends parallel the PAQ-Parents as Facilitators of Independence subscale ratings, which were each negatively associated with both God Anxiety and God Avoidance. Finally, from the FACES-III, rigid family structure (i.e., low adaptability) was also associated with greater God Avoidance.

#### *Summary of Results*

Due to the number of measures employed to assess parental spirituality and attachment, a principal components analysis of the subscales, not the individual items, was conducted. Included in the analysis were 9 subscales: 4 PBI subscales, 3 PAQ subscales, and the 2 FACES-III

**Table 2**  
*Zero-order correlations between parental attachment scales  
 with Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) subscales.*

Parental Attachment Measures:	AGI-Avoidance	AGI-Anxiety
PBI-Maternal Care	-.31**	-.02
PBI-Paternal Care	-.24**	.06
PBI-Maternal Overprotection	.16	.32**
PBI-Paternal Overprotection	.29**	.18*
PAQ-Affective Quality of Relationships	-.30**	-.02
PAQ- Family as Source of Support	-.23	-.18*
PAQ-Parents as Facilitators of Independence	-.20*	-.18*
FACES III-Cohesion	-.25	.10
FACES III-Adaptability	-.19*	.07

*Note:* PBI = Parental Bonding Inventory, PAQ = Parental Attachment Questionnaire, FACES III = Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale  
 \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

**Table 3**  
*Zero-order correlations between factor scores of family spirituality, intimacy,  
 and support of autonomy with Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) subscales.*

Factor score dimensions:	AGI-Avoidance	AGI-Anxiety
Family Spirituality	-.34**	-.10
Family Intimacy	-.28**	.14
Family Supportive of Autonomy	-.21*	-.29**

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

subscales. As expected, three main factors emerged (based upon a scree test). Factor 1 was labeled Parental Spirituality (comprised of the Religious Emphasis Scale, Parental Spirituality ratings, and Parental Hypocrisy ratings with high scores indicating greater spirituality). Factor 2 was labeled Family Intimacy (comprised of the PBI-Maternal and Paternal Care, FACES-III Cohesion, PAQ-Affective Quality of Relationships, and PAQ-Parents as Source of Support subscales with high scores indicating greater family intimacy). Factor 3 was labeled Family Supportive of Autonomy (comprised of the PBI-Maternal and Paternal Overprotection, FACES-III Adaptability, and PAQ-Parents as Facilitators of Independence subscales with high scores indicating greater parental support for child's autonomy). Factor scores for these factors were computed for each participant. The correlations between these scores and attachment to God ratings are reported in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 3, emotionally cold or unspiritual families appeared to produce increased God Avoidance, but not Anxiety, a trend consistent with Dismissing attachment styles. That is, respondents from these religious homes which were lacking in intimacy or spiritual depth appeared to be more dismissing with God. Alternatively, respondents from overprotective, rigid, or authoritarian homes tended to report both greater God Anxiety and Avoidance. Again, this is the profile of the Fearful attachment style which is characterized by approach-avoidance conflicts regarding the attachment figure.

Finally, there were legitimate reasons to expect interactions between the parental spirituality and attachment measures. All interactions were explored but none were found to be significant.

### Discussion

Collectively, the results of the current study highlight the association between early experi-

ences in the home and later religious experience. Parents' spirituality and bonding were associated with attachment to God dimensions among college students. Comparisons between parental variables and attachment to God appear to support a correspondence between working models of parents and God.

### ***Parental Spirituality and Hypocrisy***

Spirituality in the home was associated with greater reliance on and intimacy with God. Specifically, religious emphases in the home, the spirituality of mothers and fathers, and paternal hypocrisy were associated with avoidance of intimacy with God. In the current study, families that engaged in more religious activities, such as attending church, reading scripture, and praying were associated with later reliance on God among college students. In terms of parental spirituality, students who reported that their parents had less of a personal relationship with God were more likely to have difficulty relying upon or being intimate with God themselves. Likewise, those who viewed their fathers as hypocritical were more likely to be avoidant in their relationship with God.

Interestingly, parental spirituality variables did not correlate with the anxiety dimension of attachment to God. In both phases of analyses, zero-order correlations and factor score correlations, parental spirituality failed to correlate with anxiety over lovability in relationship to God. Thereby, these trends seem more evident of the Dismissing attachment style than the Fearful or Preoccupied attachment style. College students who grew up in homes that did not heavily emphasize religion or have examples of parents who had strong spiritual relationships also did not have high levels of intimacy in their own relationships with God. Alternatively, they did not seem to be overly concerned with whether God loved them or was pleased with them.

### ***Parental Attachment***

Both the zero-order correlations and the factor score results showed support for an association between parental attachment and God Avoidance and Anxiety. Two general dimensions of parenting emerged in the principal components analyses, Family Intimacy and Family Supportive of Autonomy. Generally, family intimacy variables were associated with God avoidance. Respondents from families with lower levels of warmth, care, and support reported greater avoidance of intimacy with God. Family intimacy

was not, however, associated with the anxiety dimension of attachment to God, again evidence of a Dismissing attachment style. Bartholomew (1990) argued that those with a Dismissing attachment style often withdraw from all intimate relationships by adulthood.

The Family Supportive of Autonomy factor was related to both God Avoidance and Anxiety, the combination that is descriptive of the Fearful attachment style. In homes that were overprotective, rigid, and authoritarian, respondents reported more avoidance of intimacy with God and anxiety over their lovability. Thus, it appears that authoritarian parents produce children with concerns about their personal worth and God's love, which are associated with fears of abandonment. This finding parallels research in the general parenting styles literature regarding authoritarian parenting (Baumrind, 1971, 1991). The implicit message in authoritarian families can be that the child is not worthy of trust or autonomy and this may lead to negative views of self (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003). Consequently, relationships are viewed as conditional, generalizing to a fear of abandonment by God and others.

Finally, from the Adaptability subscale results, rigid family structure was associated with greater God Avoidance. Possibly, a rigid family structure produces rigid expectations about how God will work or what He will allow to happen. When these expectations are violated, doubts result about God's care and protection, therefore avoidance of God increases.

### ***Correspondence versus Compensation and Future Direction***

The results of the study largely support the view of correspondence. The working models were consistent across recollected bonds with parents and current relationship with God. In the current study, correspondence was predicted because a more relational aspect of religion, rather than the behavioral manifestations of the relationship, was being assessed. To ensure continual advancement and understanding of working models and attachment to God, future studies need to be deliberate in the manner in which they frame the compensation/correspondence issue as well as in the choice of assessment measures. Admittedly, this study only glimpses a cross-sectional view of these relationship bonds and not a view over time. To continue addressing the issue of correspondence and compensation, future research needs to address

the consistency across all three attachment bonds simultaneously and, ideally, longitudinally: parental, love relationships, and God.

In addition, replication of these results is needed with more diverse samples. The current sample was predominantly comprised of individuals who were from the Church of Christ denomination and female. In addition, the use of an exclusively college sample poses some problems. The developmental tasks of college-aged individuals often include renegotiating parental bonds and exploration of their personal faith. Conceivably, in religious homes that are also authoritarian, avoidance of God may reflect a resistance to the parenting style rather than religion itself.

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baby uses parent as secure base expresses clear pleasure when parents return. Avoidant attachment. baby seems unresponsive to parent, slow to greet parent on reunion. Insecure resistant attachment. baby seeks closeness to parent is distressed or angry when parent returns. Disorganized disoriented attachment. reflects greatest insecurities, baby shows confused, contradictory behavior. - compensation vs. correspondence -internal working models of our primary care giver form the basis of our attachment relationship with God. You might also like NCLEX-RN Exam | Mometrix Comprehensive Guide. Correspondence vs. compensation may depend upon type of attachment and religiosity of parents. Religious parents. Secure attachment positive relationship with religiosity. Attachment to God and parents Evidence for correspondence or compensation? Paer presented at the Christian Association for Psychological Studies International Conference, St. Petersburg, FL. McCullough - Vaillant, L.M. (1997). Religiousness and perceived childhood attachment: Profiling socialized correspondence and emotional compensation Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 1999 Vol. 38 254 273. GranqvistP.HagekullB. Religiousness and perceived childhood attachment: Profiling socialized correspondence and emotional compensation Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 1999 Vol. 38 254 273 )| false. Search Google Scholar. Export Citation. GranqvistP.IvarssonT.BrobergA.G.HagekullB. McDonaldA.BeckR.AllisonS.NorsworthyL. Attachment to God and parents: Testing the correspondence vs. compensation hypotheses Journal of Psychology and Christianity 2005 Vol. 24 21 28. McDonaldA.BeckR.AllisonS.NorsworthyL.