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Experiences with God Predict God Attachment

By

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At least since the time of Sigmund Freud, psychologists have been curious about people's representations of and relationships with God. Freud (1939; 1950; 1961) famously assumed that religious ideas, such as God, were projections resulting from unconscious wishes developed during early childhood experiences, such as the wish for a protective father. Building on Freud's foundation, the psychoanalyst Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) and the object-relations theorist Moshe Spero (1992) researched a primarily emotion-based representation of God that develops out of a person's early childhood experiences with parents and other early-life caretakers. Given the basis of this theory, Rizzuto and others (e.g., Cassibba, Granqvist, Costantini, & Gatto 2008; Dickie, Ajega, Kobylak, & Nixon 2006; Miner 2009) have looked to the attachment research of John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1979, 1980) and Mary Ainsworth (1978) for a conceptual framework for the potential forms of parental attachment that may inform a person's representation of and relationship with God.

Rizzuto (1979) and other researchers propose that early-life experiences with parents generate either a secure or insecure style of attachment to parents. Importantly, from the perspective of attachment theory, personal experiences are the most important contributor to attachment style. Hence, the argument goes, parental attachment subsequently influences the person's relationship with other attachment figures, such as God. As an example study from this perspective, Rosalinda Cassiba, Pehr Granqvist, Alessandro Costantini, and Sergio Gatto (2008) confirmed their hypothesis that adult recall of childhood experiences with parents predicts the parental-attachment style of devout theists, which in turn predicts the style of participants' God attachment. If, for example, participants formed a secure attachment to their parents, then the participants would also form a secure attachment to God.

## **Experiences with God**

One potentially important contributor to God attachment that has not been studied is personal experiences with God. The present research examines the possibility that, along with experiences with parents and parental attachment, a person's experiences with God may also contribute to God attachment. Brent D. Slife and Jeffrey S. Reber (2009) argue that since many theists experience God's activity in their lives, these experiences should be among the potential contributing factors examined if an adequate account of theists' God attachment is to be made

(see also Slife, Reber, & Downs, 2012). In their review of the Cassibba et al. (2008) study, Slife and Reber (2009) conclude that, “As identified theists, the participants were likely to understand their relationship to God through their experiences and perceptions of that relationship . . . By not assessing these theistic experiences and perceptions the researchers omit what is for the participants an essential factor” of the participants’ representations of and relationship with God (p. 26). They argue that religious activities are not the same thing as, and cannot stand in the place of, theists’ reported experiences with God, just as being a member of a family and living in a house in which parents also live is not the same thing as personal experiences with parents.

If, as Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978) assert, parental attachment develops out of early childhood experiences with parents that differ from other kinds of experiences (e.g., learning about the concept of parents in a school class or from peers), then it is also possible that theists’ attachment to God could develop out of their experiences with God, which differ from parental experiences and from educational experiences that develop theists’ representations of God. In order to determine whether theists’ experiences with God are important factors in the formation of their God image, those experiences must be directly examined.

## **Hypotheses**

The present research addresses the extent to which participants’ experiences with God predict their God attachment, independent of their parental attachment. To assess this relationship, I assessed three different hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1.** First, consistent with prior research on parental attachment and God attachment, I hypothesized that participants’ parental attachment would predict their God attachment even when controlling for their experiences with God.

**Hypothesis 2.** Second, I hypothesized that participants’ experiences with God would be an independent predictor of God attachment when controlling for their parental attachment.

**Hypothesis 3.** Third, because the attachment literature (e.g., Bowlby, 1979; Ainsworth, et al., 1978) suggests that direct personal experiences with the object of attachment are a better predictor of attachment than other variables, I expected experiences with God to be a significantly stronger predictor of God attachment than parental attachment.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

One hundred and thirty-four individuals who affirmatively answered the question “Do you believe in God?” participated in this study. Eighty-five participants attended one of two private religious institutions in the West and Midwest regions of America and 49 attended a medium-sized public state university located in the southeastern United States. To obtain a more diverse theistic sample, two different religious universities with different Christian populations were used for the religious university condition. Although they differ in denomination, both schools require religious education courses for all students for all four years of their undergraduate education. The public state university used for this study was selected because students who attend this school were likely to be theistic given the university’s location in the southeastern part of the United States. The average age of participants was 20.82. Thirty-three percent of the participants were male and 67% were female. Thirty-four percent of participants self-identified as Latter-Day Saint, 23.1% as evangelical Christian, 20.1% as protestant

Christian, 4.5%, as Catholic, 0.7% as Muslim, and 17.9% self-identified as “Other” but did not specify a faith-tradition.

### **Instruments**

Four instruments were used in this study: a demographics questionnaire, the Parental Attachment Measure (PAM), the God Attachment Measure (GAM), and the Experiences with God Measure (EGM). The demographics questionnaire included questions about participants’ sex, age, race, major and year in school, religious affiliation, marital status, and belief in God. The PAM and the GAM were developed by Maureen Miner (2009) to assess parental and God attachment styles in a manner that is consistent with Bowlby’s theory and are regularly used in God attachment research. A research group I worked with developed the EGM to assess participants’ experiences with God.

**The Parental Attachment Measure (PAM).** The PAM consists of 18 items that are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (1=“Not at all true” to 5=“Very true”) with seven items reverse scored, meaning that on these items a higher rating indicated less, not more, parental attachment. An example of one item in the PAM is “I am comfortable depending upon my parents.” The PAM reported a Cronbach’s reliability coefficient of .84, indicating that all the questions on the measure are highly related to each other. Higher scores on the PAM indicate a more secure attachment to parents.

**The God Attachment Measure (GAM).** The GAM is a measure of God attachment that is a modification of the PAM in which references to God replace references to parents. For example, one item states, “I am comfortable depending upon God.” The GAM also consists of 18 items that are rated, scored, and totaled in the same manner as the PAM. The GAM had a reliability coefficient of .82. Higher scores on the GAM indicate a more secure attachment to God.

**The Experiences with God Measure (EGM).** The EGM was created to assess experiences with God. To create the EGM, a research group I worked with asked six theistic students to think of their experiences with God and produce questions that could be used to assess those experiences. As a focus group, we discussed these experiences with God until we identified 18 different questions about experiences with God that represented the range of experiences with God theists have. We then made modifications to improve and standardize the formatting and wording of the questions.

The EGM uses the same five-point Likert-type scale as the PAM and the GAM. Four negative items were reverse scored and summed with the other 14 items for a total score. Higher scores on the EGM indicated more positive experiences with God. The two-week test-retest reliability of the EGM, as measured with Pearson’s  $r$ , was 0.88, indicating that the measure was fairly consistent over a two-week period.

### **Procedures**

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained from each school prior to recruiting participants. All participants were recruited using an email invitation that directed them to an online survey on the Qualtrics website. Each participant provided consent and then took the survey, which consisted of four parts in the following order: a demographics questionnaire, the Parental Attachment Measure, the God Attachment Measure, and the

Experiences with God Measure. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed.

## Results

### **Hypothesis one: PAM independently predicts GAM.**

To assess the first hypothesis that theists' experiences with parents predict God attachment even when controlling for experiences with God, I used partial correlation because it allows for the correlation of two variables (e.g., the PAM and the GAM) while controlling for the variance in that relationship that is accounted for by a third variable (e.g., the EGM; Sheskin 2007). In other words, partial correlation allows a researcher to assess the relationship between two variables while excluding the influence of a third variable. The partial correlation can be compared with the bivariate correlation, which does not exclude the influence of a third variable. This comparison allows some understanding of the influence of the third variable (the variable controlled during partial correlation) on the relationship between the first two variables.

As can be seen in Table 1, the PAM and the GAM correlated significantly using bivariate correlation. This result replicated the findings from previous research suggesting that parental attachment and God attachment are significantly related. Partial correlation analysis between scores on the PAM and scores on the GAM, which removed the effects of the EGM, showed a dramatic reduction in the strength of the correlation, though it remained statistically significant (see Table 1). When controlling for the variance between the PAM and the GAM that was attributable to the EGM, the variance accounted for in the PAM-GAM relationship decreased by thirty-three percent to 11.4% (see Table 1). In other words, when controlling for the EGM, the PAM predicts about 11% of the differences between scores on the GAM (and vice versa). This finding suggests, as expected by hypothesis one, that parental attachment is significantly related to God attachment independent of experiences with God. The difference between the bivariate and partial correlation also suggests that parental attachment predicts God attachment to a lesser degree than the bivariate correlation suggests. Thus, parental attachment may not be the only significant predictor of God attachment; experiences with God may also predict God attachment.

Table 1

*Bivariate and Partial Correlation Coefficients of the Parental Attachment Measure (PAM), the God Attachment Measure (GAM), and the Experiences with God Measure (EGM), with Variance Estimates*

Correlated Measures	Bivariate Correlation ( <i>r</i> )	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	Variable Controlled	Partial Correlation ( <i>pr</i> )	<i>pr</i> <sup>2</sup>	Variance Reduced
PAM-GAM	.415**	.172	EGM	.338**	.114	33%
EGM-GAM	.680**	.462	PAM	.652**	.425	8%
PAM-EGM	.259**	.067	GAM	-.036	.001	99.6%

\*\* *p* < 0.01

### **Hypothesis two: EGM independently predicts GAM.**

In order to test the hypothesis that experiences with God are an independent predictor of God attachment for theists, I examined the relationship of the EGM and the GAM using partial correlation. As Table 1 shows, the bivariate correlation between the EGM and the GAM was strong and significant. When controlling for the effects of PAM on the EGM-GAM relationship using partial correlation, the EGM-GAM correlation was minimally reduced and remained significant. The variance accounted for in the EGM-GAM relationship decreased by eight percent to 42.5% (see Table 1). In other words, when controlling for the PAM, the EGM predicts about 42% of the differences between scores on the GAM (and vice versa). Consistent with our hypothesis, this finding suggests that experiences with God are a significant predictor of God attachment when controlling for parental attachment.

Before I could conclude that the EGM independently predicts the GAM, I examined the relationship between the EGM and the PAM as well. If the EGM and the PAM were significantly correlated after removing the influence of the GAM on their relationship, then the independence of the EGM could be called into question. The EGM might be redundant with the PAM or it might be argued that parental attachment predicts experiences with God, which then predict God attachment. Only if the EGM was not correlated with the PAM after the effects of the GAM are removed would it be possible to conclude that the EGM is a truly independent predictor of the GAM. To assess this issue, I again used partial correlation.

Table 1 shows that, for the bivariate correlation, the EGM and the PAM correlated significantly, though this relationship was the weakest of the three bivariate correlations. This finding suggests that experiences with God are related to parental attachment. However, when controlling for the effects of the GAM on the EGM-PAM relationship using partial correlation, the relationship between the EGM and the PAM nearly disappeared, and the variance accounted for in the EGM-PAM relationship decreased to 0.1%—a 99.6% decrease (see Table 1). In other words, when controlling for the GAM, the EGM predicts about 0.1% of the differences between scores on the PAM (and vice versa). Furthermore, the partial correlation between the EGM and the PAM when controlling for the GAM is no longer statistically significant. These results strongly suggest that, consistent with our hypothesis, the only reason there is a relationship between the EGM and the PAM is because both are independently correlated with the GAM. Thus, hypothesis two, that experiences with God are an independent predictor of God attachment for theists, is supported.

### **Hypothesis three: EGM is a stronger predictor of GAM than PAM.**

In order to assess the hypothesis that participants' experiences with God are a significantly stronger predictor of God attachment than parental attachment, I compared the partial correlation coefficient for the EGM-GAM relationship ( $r = 0.652$ ) with the partial correlation coefficient for the PAM-GAM relationship ( $r = 0.338$ ). David L. Sheskin (2007) provides an equation for calculating a  $t$ -score with  $n - 3$  degrees of freedom for the difference between two correlation coefficients derived from the same sample. Using this process, I performed a one-tailed  $t$ -test and determined that the EGM is a significantly better predictor of the GAM than the PAM ( $t [131] = 3.28, p < 0.005, r^2 = 0.07$ ).

## **Discussion**

The present study investigated the following question: Are experiences with God an independent, and perhaps better, predictor of God attachment than parental attachment? The results indicate that theists' experiences with God did, at a statistically significant level, predict God attachment independent of parental attachment. Indeed, theists' experiences with God were responsible for almost half of their God attachment even when the impact of parental attachment was included. This finding is consistent with the belief held by many theists that their personal experiences with God play an important role in their understanding of God.

The results also support Slife and Reber's (2009) argument that the omission of theistic aspects of theistic phenomena and events may result in an incomplete account of the phenomenon of interest. Parental attachment, though also a significant predictor of God attachment, appears to be insufficient in accounting for theists' God attachment. Given the strong association between experiences with God and God attachment, and the weaker relationship between parental attachment and God attachment, the results of this study strongly support Slife and Reber's (2009) assertion that experiences with God are "an essential factor in the development of [theists'] own images of God" (p. 26).

The finding that experiences with God are a significantly better predictor of God attachment than parental attachment suggests the interesting possibility of a theistic form of attachment theory. As mentioned in the introduction, attachment researchers Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1979, 1980) and Ainsworth (1978) grounded their theory of parental attachment in personal experiences with parents. For example, if parents were inconsistent in providing appropriate care to a child and this pattern of experiences between parents and child was repeated throughout childhood, then the child very likely would develop an insecure parental attachment style that would in turn influence the child's future relationships to other attachment figures (Ainsworth 1978). In a similar manner, the findings of this study suggest that theists' personal experiences with God may develop a secure or insecure style of God attachment directly. That is, just as experiences with parents develop a particular style of parental attachment, experiences with God could develop a particular style of God attachment. This theistic form of attachment theory does not diminish the influence of other predictors on God attachment such as parental attachment, but it does support the importance of understanding the relationship between experiences and attachment. Admittedly, the findings of the present study are preliminary and further research will be needed to develop this theory fully and flesh out its similarities and differences from parental attachment theory, but these findings do raise some interesting possibilities for future God attachment research, such as the necessity of including experiences with God in any approach.

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that experiences with God are an important, powerful, and independent predictor of God attachment that should be included in further research on the topic. As Rizzuto (1979) argued, God attachment is a form of attachment that is primarily emotion-based. For theists, these emotions toward God seem to be the result of experiences with God. For example, theists seem to experience God's presence during prayer and worship and often experience God affectively, such as experiencing God's love. In this way,

experiences with God, more than experiences with parents, seem to engender the emotions that provide the foundation for theists' attachment to God.

More than a century ago, William James (1907/1999) affirmed the importance of experiences with God in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He argued that these experiences need to be studied in order for researchers to achieve a rich and comprehensive account of human psychology. If researchers neglect this important and impactful part of many people's lives, their findings will ring hollow and their interpretations will be found lacking (Reber, 2006). This study is an attempt to take James seriously by assessing the impact of theistic experiences on a person's life. From James's and my perspective, more research is needed that seriously considers theists' experiences and examines the role those experiences may play in a host of psychological phenomena.

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