

An Investigation into the Relationship between Attachment to God and Different Kinds of Forgiveness among Teenage Boys

Shahdokht Azadi^{1*}, Saeed Habibollahi¹, Leila Shiasi Arani², Masomeh Mohammadi³, Javaher Eisazadeh⁴

¹Department of Psychology Sciences, Science and Gachsaran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gachsaran, Iran

² Master of Psychology and Education of Exceptional Children, university Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

³ Masters of Philosophy Education, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran.

⁴Ph.D. Student Curriculum Development, Department of Education sciences, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Received: November 21, 2014

Accepted: January 25, 2015

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between attachment to God and forgiveness in teenagers. To this aim, 80 male students were selected using cluster sampling. The data required for the study were collected by two questionnaires about forgiveness and attachment to God. Using Pearson's correlation, the data revealed that there is a positive and meaningful relationship between attachment to God and forgiveness ($\text{sig}=0.01$, $r=0.28$). However, the other two aspects of forgiveness (cognitive and behavioural) did not reveal positive and meaningful relationship. Thus, it can be said that attachment to God mainly impacts one's feelings about other people.

KEYWORDS: Attachment, God, Forgiveness, Teenage Boys

1. INTRODUCTION

A child's tendency to establish a kind of close relationship with certain people and consequently feel more secure in the presence of these people has been called "attachment". The bulk of studies into attachment in children is rooted in the researches conducted by John Bowlby in 1950s and 1960s. Based on the attachment theory, a child's inability to have strong attachments to one or a number of people at the early years of life is linked to their inability to have close individual relationship in adulthood [1]. Based on the studies conducted by Ainsworth et al. the behaviours that most children exhibit in unfamiliar situations can be divided into three categories: secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment [2]. Children with secure attachment find their parents caring, available, and able to satisfy their needs. However, when parents are incapable of providing their children with a secure shelter or offering them a secure refuge, they might not be able to gain their children's trust and thus in such families, children will be deprived of having secure attachment and consequently these children might either develop avoidant or anxious attachment. Children and adolescents develop a concept of God in their minds as their cognitive and emotional development progresses. With children's growth taking place in a suitable environment, the unconscious motivation for theology and contact with the transcendent being turns conscious, and some concepts are formed in their minds which prompt them to believe in ever-lasting God. Thus, they gradually realize that the scope of their parents' accountability, availability and capability is too tentative and limited to meet their needs and that transcendent God is the only infinite being. From this stage on, the process of formation and evolution of reliance on and confidence in God becomes prominent. Although the shift in secure attachment from parents to a supreme being is gradual, it forms the basis of reliance on God. The concept of secure attachment to God is formed in adolescents along with development of an inner pattern of attachment. And the shift of their expectations from parents and friends to Almighty God – to meet their needs and ride out difficult situations – forms the main core of spirituality in people [3]. Kirk Patrick is of the conviction that relationship with God is more similar to parent-child attachment rather than adulthood relationships [4]. He has presented some evidence indicating the characteristics of the attached behavior in relation to God. These characteristics generally identify God as a being we can approach through worship and prayer. What all these indicators share is that through worship, we can have a sincere feeling of proximity to God and believe that God is always present [5]. Ghobari Bonab [3] states that childhood experiences with parents can leave tremendous effects on the nature of relationship with God, acceptance of religious teachings, and thus children's religiousness. Based on the abovementioned issues, it can be said that type of attachment in childhood affects type of attachment to God [3]. The results obtained from different researches indicate that those who have secure attachments to people also have secure attachment to God [6]. Kirk Patrick [7] has mentioned that religion can be conceptualized as a sort of attachment process [7]. Therefore, from the psychological perspective, God acts as an attachment figure towards whom people move in order to experience security and comfort [8]. Kafman, a theologian who is

*Corresponding Author: Shahdokht Azadi, Department of Psychology Sciences, Science and Gachsaran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gachsaran, Iran. E-mail: Shahdokhtazadi@yahoo.com

acquainted with the theory of attachment, states that our idea about God is absolutely an opinion about attachment imagery; God is a parent, a supporter and care-taker who is always present and is accessible to children at the time of need. Since forgiveness is one of the key components of attachment, those who feel secure attachment have the experience of being forgiven. Drawing on such experiences, these people can forgive other people in their inter-personal relationships easier than those who have never experienced forgiveness [9]. Based on Pengelton's [10] definition, forgiveness is the inside process of psychological-emotional release by which an individual who has been hurt will feel free of their anger, rage, or fear, in a way that they will no longer show any tendency for taking revenge [10]. Martin and Denton [11] are of the conviction that the process of forgiveness happens slowly and it does not constitute forgetting painful memories [11]. As it can be seen, according to Enright, the three aspects of forgiveness (self-forgiveness, forgiving other, and request for forgiveness) form the triangle of forgiveness. It means that an individual first needs to forgive himself in order to be able to forgive others. Those who feel guilty for a long time and cannot ignore their mistakes, are not able to easily forgive others. Thus any time they themselves make a mistake, they are not able to ask for forgiveness. In contrast, an individual who accepts their mistake, can forgive themselves by sympathy, modesty and self-affection, thus will be able to better forgive others and turn their attitude towards the other person positive. Such a person, if committing a mistake, can easily ask for forgiveness from the injurer [12].

Self-forgiveness and forgiving others are among the factors that can be found in people who have secure attachment. Since such people describe themselves as friendly, lovely and supporting, they can easier ignore their mistakes and since their relationships are more sustainable in comparison to insecure people, they can easier forgive people in comparison to those who have insecure attachment.

Attachment style or the degree of security in the relationship is probably an important factor that affects the two important factors of contrast management and emotional regulation in the long-term relationships [13]. The studies into attachment have demonstrated that adults' system of attachment will be activated under stressful conditions and lead the individuals with different mental patterns of attachment to regulate their emotions and cope with the stressful factor based on the methods that they learned in the past or those that have been strengthened [14]. Taking into account the concept of emotional regulation, Cerof has described secure attachment as: facilitating inter-personal relationships and increasing the tolerance level of tension while maintaining normal and organized behaviours in coping with the tension. The people who are securely attached, have more compatible approaches for organizing and controlling their emotional experiences. Forgiveness is a behavioural response to inter-personal betrayal or conflict that might be an approach that is used by those who have secure attachment in order to safely pass through the emotional storms of life. One of the potentially significant elements with regard to forgiveness, which is an under-studied area, is the type of attachment. The history of people's relationships and their security in the relationship probably affects their compatibility in the current relationships and particularly their coping with betrayal and conflict [13]. In addition, studies imply that there is a meaningful and positive correlation between forgiveness and secure attachment and there is negative and meaningful correlation between insecure attachment and forgiveness [15].

The subject is forgiveness is raised following the sense of hurt that an individual experiences in inter-personal relationships and being hurt as a tension-making factor has different personal and social consequences, among the most important ones, one can mention anger and hatred, revenge, and break up of friendships) and thus it can activate attachment system and consequently leave effects of the psychological well-being of an individual.

The concept of Forgiveness

Booris [16] is of the conviction that forgiveness is a process that shows individuals how to treat their emotional injuries by having another perspective towards the person who has hurt them [16]. Enright [17] describes forgiveness as: "a personal tendency for getting rid of the pain and the negative judgment towards the person who is responsible for the injury, which consequently leads to the change of the negative attitude to a positive one towards that person". Therefore, there is no talk of justice and fair attitude in this process, but the person who has been hurt adopts a sympathizing and friendly attitude towards the person who has hurt them and attempts to get rid of the sense of being hurt through changing the judgments, emotions, and negative attitudes towards the person who has made mistakes [17].

Forgiveness Steps from Enright's Perspective

Enright [18] believes that forgiveness requires certain steps which include emotional, cognitive and behavioural [18].

First Step: confrontation

The confrontation stage, in the cognitive realm, is when the injured confronts the injuring event and reacts to the shock of the event. First, he reviews and expresses the need for forgiveness in a cognitive style. Then, he assesses the existing hypotheses concerning the world and the people in regard to the injury. In the emotional stage, the emotional functions of the person such as emotional shock, denial, anger suppression, guilt, depression and anxiety will become evident. In the behavioural stage, the person who is hurt starts talking about the painful event [18].

Stage 2: Clarification

At this stage, the injured attempts to understand the reason behind the event and tries to give meaning to it. In the cognitive stage, this is done by the injured. In the emotional stage, the person tries to legitimize and control his feelings. In the behavioural stage, the injured pays attention to their own as well as the friends' reactions and attempts to prepare himself to move to the next stage, while he has gained a new meaning and understanding about his relationship with the injurer(s) in order to enable himself to continue the path Murray, 2002[19]

Third Stage: Practice

At this stage the injured person must pay attention to the injurer, control his anger, change the past understanding and try to make up for the past. In the cognitive stage, the injurer must look at the problem from a new perspective, must investigate and put it in a new framework and form new expectations. At the emotional stage, the injured starts sympathizing with the injurer. In the behavioural stage, the injurer makes decisions about continuing the relationship with the injurer based on the inuring event [19].

Based on the concept of attachment and forgiveness, the following research questions can be proposed:

Is there a relationship between secure attachment to God and the cognitive aspect of forgiveness?

Is there a relationship between secure attachment to God and the emotional aspect of forgiveness?

Is there a relationship between secure attachment to God and the behavioral aspect of forgiveness?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology of this research is correlational-descriptive. Male students attending a public school in Tehran in the 2010- 2011 school year formed the statistical population of the study. Clustering Sampling Method was used to pick out the samples. In other words, one school from among all boys' guidance schools in Tehran was chosen. Two freshmen classes of that school were randomly selected. In total, there were 80 students in those two classes.

Tools

In this study, the 16-item AGS tool with the 6-point Liker scale was used to measure the extent of the teenagers' attachment to God (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) [20]. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire is $\alpha=0.99$. The forgiveness tool developed by Ray [21] was used to assess the forgiveness. This questionnaire had 15 questions. Also, in this study, test-retest method was applied to determine the reliability of the test. The reliability obtained from test-retest method in this questionnaire was $r=0.86$ [12].

3. RESULTS

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of correlation coefficient between scores of attachment to God and the cognitive aspect of forgiveness

Option	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation Coefficient	Significance Level
Attachment to God	80	66.82	9.26	0.1	0.37
Cognitive forgiveness	80	8.58	2.04		

Table 1 demonstrates mean and standard deviation of correlation coefficient between scores of attachment to God and the cognitive forgiveness in the tests. The mean of scores of attachment to God in the students is 66.82 and the standard deviation is 9.26. In addition, the mean of scores of cognitive forgiveness in the present group is 8.58 and the standard deviation is 2.04. correlation coefficient between these two variables is $r=0.1$ and the level of meaning is $\text{sig}=0.37$, which indicates that there is no relationship between the score of attachment to God and cognitive forgiveness.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of correlation coefficient between scores of attachment to God and the emotional aspect of forgiveness

Option	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation Coefficient	Significance Level
Attachment to God	80	66.82	9.26	0.28**	0.01
Emotional forgiveness	80	12.91	3.31		

Table 2 demonstrates mean and standard deviation of correlation coefficient between scores of attachment to God and the emotional forgiveness in the tests. The mean of scores of attachment to God in the students is 66.82 and the standard deviation is 9.26. In addition, the mean of scores of emotional forgiveness in the present group is 12.91 and the standard deviation is 3.31. Correlation coefficient between these two variables is

$r=0.28$ and the level of meaning is $\text{sig}=0.01$, which indicates that the relationship between the score of attachment to God and emotional forgiveness is positive and meaningful.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of correlation coefficient between scores of attachment to God and the behavioural aspect of forgiveness

Option	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation Coefficient	Significance Level
Attachment to God	80	66.82	9.26	0.21	0.05
Behavioral forgiveness	80	8.46	1.98		

Table 3 demonstrates mean and standard deviation of correlation coefficient between scores of attachment to God and the behavioural forgiveness in the tests. The mean of scores of attachment to God in the students is 66.82 and the standard deviation is 9.26. In addition, the mean of scores of emotional forgiveness in the present group is 8.46 and the standard deviation is 1.98. Correlation coefficient between these two variables is $r=0.21$ and the level of meaning is $\text{sig}=0.05$, which indicates that there is no relationship between the score of attachment to God and behavioural forgiveness.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that there is a positive and meaningful relationship between attachment to God and emotional forgiveness. However, no meaningful relationship was observed between attachment to God and the cognitive aspect of forgiveness. In regard to the relationship between attachment to God and behavioural forgiveness, the correlation coefficient of $r=0.21$ was obtained, which is not considered meaningful, although the correlation is positive. The findings in the emotional aspect of forgiveness are in fact in line with the findings of the studies conducted by Beliad *et al.* [15]. Within the theoretical framework, there is a considerable similarity between attachment theory and forgives. Both include such components as trust, relationship, sympathy, emotional self-regulation, and a complex set of psychological changes that focus on self and others (such as wrong-doers). Forgiveness usually requires sympathy and overcoming self-doubt, guilt, and anger [22]. In the threatening situations, this process will be facilitated by the secure attachment style [23, 24, 25]. The concerns that people with insecure attachments have prevent them from sympathizing with the wrong-doers or controlling their negative emotions. In contrast, secure attachment reduces the need for self-protection or self-punishment [26] and allows the individual to consider the other party's perspective and to control his rage [27, 28, 29]. Although the present study evaluates attachment to God and not general attachment, the results obtained from the study indicate that there is a positive and meaningful relationship between attachment to God and emotional forgiveness. However no relationship has been observed between attachment to God and cognitive forgiveness, indicating that attachment itself is of the emotional and sensual type. However, strengthening the cognitive foundations of belief in God can enhance the other aspects of cognitive forgiveness.

REFERENCES

1. Atkinson R, Atkinson Ri, Smith S, Edward E, Bam D, Hoksma J, Nolan S, 2002. Psychological Context. translated by Mohammad Naghi Barahani, Reza Zamani, Mehrnaz Shahraray, Yousof Karimi, Nisan Gahan, Mahdi Mohayodin, Rosh Publications, Vol 1.
2. Pazhoohinia Sh, 2009. Explaining the psychological injuries on the basis of attachment styles. MA Dissertation, Alzahra University.
3. Ghobari Bonab B, 2009. Reliance on God as the approach towards solving the problems of life.
4. Moosavi Khorshidi, H R, 2009. Pathological study of the micro-system of family in religious training of children. Gooyeh Weekly in Ghom Province.
5. Donald A, Beck R, Allison S, Norsworthy L, 2005. Attachment to God and Parents: Testing the Correspondence vs. Compensation Hypotheses. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. 18, 112-120.
6. Khavaninzadeh M, Ezhe'I J, Mazaheri M A, 2005. A Comparison between attachment style of students with internal or external religious orientations. *Psychology Journal* 35, 9th year, issue 3, fall.
7. Kirkpatrick L A, Davis K E, 1994. Attachment style, Gender, and relationship stability: A longitudinal analysis, *Journal of personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 502-512.
8. Joules Shaalon M A, 2007. THE Mediating Role of God Attachment between Religiosity and Spirituality and Psychological Adjustment in Young Adults.
9. Ghiami S Z, 2005. Investigation into the relationship of attachment style and religious styles of coping. *Psychological and educational sciences journal*. 35th year, issue 1.
10. Pingelton J P, 1989. "The role function of forgiveness in the psychotherapeutic process" in J. Sell & T. Hargrave (Eds) *Forgiveness theoretical and empirical review* (pp . 21 – 356), 1998. Vol. 20.
11. Martin M, Denton R, 1998. "Defining forgiveness: an empirical exploration of process and role". *American Journal of family therapy*, 26(4), 281.

12. Yadegari H, 2005. Investigating the relationship between Forgiveness and satisfaction in the life of nurses. MA dissertation of consultancy at Alzahra University, Tehran.
13. Lawler R, Kathleen A, Younger, Jarred W, Piferi, Rachel L, Jones Warren H, 2006. The role of adult attachment style in forgiveness following an interpersonal offense. *Journal of Counseling & Development*. 84, 493-502.
14. Besharat M A, Shalchi B, 2007. Styles of coping with tension. *Iranian Psychologists Quarterly*, vol, 3, No. 11. 15-21.
15. Beliad M R, Nahidpoor F, Yadegari H, Bozorgmehri M, 2009. Investigating the relationship between attachment styles, forgiveness, and marital confrontations in the couples referring to the consultation center of Karaj city. The ratified project of Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch, Islamic and Humanitarian Sciences Research Center.
16. Borris R E, 2005. "Finding forgiveness" A 7 Step Program for Letting Go of Anger and Bitterness, united states of America, McGraw-Hill companies.
17. Enright R D, 1991. "Researching the process model of forgiveness with psychological interventions". *Journal of psychological and theological perspective*, 14, 45 – 107.
18. Enright R D, Cohl C T, 1998. Researching the Process model of forgiveness with psychological interventions. *Journal of psychological and theological perspective*, 14, 45-107.
19. Murray R, 2002. "Forgiveness as a therapeutic option." *Journal of counseling and therapy for couples and families*, 10(3), 315 – 321.
20. Sim T N, Loh B S M, 2003. Attachment to God: Measurement and dynamics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 15, 52-63.
21. Rye M, Pargament K, 2002. Forgiveness and romantic relationships in college can it heal the wounded heart? *The Journal of clinical psychology*, 58(4) 419-441.
22. Enright R D, 2001. *Forgiveness is a choice*, APA Press, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC .
23. Collins N L, Read S J, 1994. Cognitive representations of attachment: the structure and function of working models. In: K. Bartholomew and D. Perlman, Editors, *Advances in personal relationship*. Vol. 5. Attachment processes in adulthood, Jessica Kingsley, London, pp. 53–90.
24. Feeney B C, Collins N L, 2001. Predictors of caregiving in adult intimate relationships: An attachment theoretical perspective, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 972–994.
25. Gillath O , Shaver P R, Mikulincer M, 2005. An attachment-theoretical approach to compassion and altruism. In: P. Gilbert, Editor, *Compassion: Conceptualizations, research, and use in psychotherapy*, Brunner-Routledge, London, pp. 121–147.
26. Mikulincer M, Shaver P R, 2005. Attachment theory and emotions in close relationships: exploring the attachment-related dynamics of emotional reactions to relational events, *Personal Relationships*, 12 ,149–168.
27. Farrow T F D, Zheng Y, Wilkinson I D, Spence I D, Deakin J F W, Tarrier N, 2001. Investigating the functional anatomy of empathy and forgiveness, *NeuroReport* 12, 2433–2438.
28. Konstam V, Chernoff M, Deveney S, 2001. Toward forgiveness: the role of shame, guilt, anger, and empathy, *Counseling & Values*, vol: 46, pp. 26–39.
29. McCullough M E, Rachal K C, 1997. Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and social Psychology*, 73, 321-336.