

Exploring Human Relationship with God as a Secure Base

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Three studies explored God as a secure base following the model of John Bowlby. In *Study 1* qualitative information collected from participants provided evidence on functional relationship with God as secure base. Conceptualizing attachment to God along two dimensions, anxiety and avoidance, was the focus of *Study 2*, but the distributions of scores obtained were not normal. The effect of priming on recall of memories related to God as a secure base was seen in *Study 3*. Priming significantly affected latency, number of memories recalled, and categories generated. The study provides evidence that God serves as a secure base, which is a generalization of primary infant-mother relationship.

Keywords: Secure base; Attachment theory; Priming

In recent years Bowlby's attachment theory has been applied to understand personality and psychopathology (Bartholomew, Cobb, & Poole, 1997; Davila, & Levy, 2006; Maunder, & Hunter, 2001). Bowlby integrated insights from psychoanalysis, ethology, evolution, cognitive psychology, and child development to understand the bonding between the infant and its caregiver (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). He conceptualized attachment as a behavior system which serves biological Function for the infant and develops during fixed periods for each species. The four major characteristics of attachment relations are *maintenance of proximity* to attachment object; *distress* upon separation from the attachment figure; *approach* towards attachment figure when there is external threat (*safe haven*); and, *exploration* of external environment when the attachment figure is available (*secure base*) (Ainsworth, & Bowlby, 1991; Tancredy, & Fraley, 2006). A significant development in attachment theory is its generalization to adolescent romantic relationships (Hazan, & Shaver, 1987) and adult attachment relationship (Cicirelli, 2004; Simpson, Winterheld, Orina, & Rholes, 2007).

Another area where attachment framework has been applied is the

conceptualization of God as an attachment figure. Kirkpatrick (1998) has explored the attachment to God using the four criteria of Bowlby which defines relationship between infants and its caregiver: proximity maintenance, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base. This work has been carried further by Granqvist, and Hagekull (1999, 2000). Another study explored attachment to God into *anxiety* and *avoidance* dimensions (Beck, and McDonald, 2004) by reducing Bartholomew's (1990) fourfold typology of secure, preoccupied, fearful, and avoidant attachment styles. In the same line, Cicirelli (2004) hypothesized that people with attachment to God would have the desire to protect and defend their beliefs about God.

A significant aspect of Bowlby's attachment theory is the idea of internal working models (IWMs), which linked formation of attachment with caregiver or attachment object to the infant's cognitive development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Workman, & Reader, 2004). In this way the child's development of the IWMs of self and others become integral part of memory processes (Simpson et al., 2007). These memory processes incorporate the representations of caregivers and related

environmental features in the mind of child, which subsequently guide child's behavior. Therefore one way to understand the IWMs of an individual is through the exploration of his/her memories. There are two major categories of long-term memory: *declarative* and *non-declarative* memory. The non-declarative memory is largely unconscious and involves four kinds of memories: *skills, priming, dispositions, and non-associative* (Solso, 2006). The priming has been used as a technique to explore the internal representations of the individual (Robinson-Riegler, & Robinson-Riegler, 2008; Sternberg, 2007). Therefore, on the one hand, priming is a long-term memory process, but on the other hand, it is a technique to explore the internal representations. It has been shown that priming facilitates the retrieval of memories or associations (De Marree, Wheeler, & Petty, 2005; Ledgerwood, & Chaiken, 2007); therefore it can be used explicitly as well as implicitly to explore the attachment relations with God.

The major objective of the present study was to explore God as a secure base. In order to achieve this objective three studies were conducted. The aim of first study was to explore the relationship with God by using qualitative method to define the functional characteristics of secure relationship. The objective of the second study was to explore the anxiety and avoidance dimensions of attachment to God following Beck, and McDonald (2004). The third study assessed the effect of priming on the recall of memories related to God as a secure base.

Method

Study 1

70 educated middle class adults (35 males, 35 females) from an urban area (Solan, Himachal Pradesh) of Hindu community served as subjects. The participants were selected opportunistically. They were interviewed using 13 open-ended questions following the approach of Cicirelli (2004). The

first two questions were about religious beliefs of the person, the next two questions probed his style of prayer, and there were two questions about belief in God's power. The remaining seven questions explored the attachment to God as a secure base.

Results

The responses were recorded and categorized. In general there was overwhelming evidence that the participants, who were Hindus, had strong belief in God, used various ways of prayer and believed in His powers for variety of reasons. As far as the main objective of the study was concerned, that people believed in God as a secure base, the evidence was very clear in terms of two measures. First, all the responses given by seventy participants to 13 questions were classified into 7 categories (Cicirelli, 2004). The responses under these categories were: 1. proximity-seeking through prayer (146); 2. seeing God as loving and watching over one (149); 3. feeling that God gives a sense of comfort and warmth (14); 4. feeling that God gives sense of security and strength (249); 5. feeling that God helps with problems (70); 6. feeling distress if there were no God (0); and 7. expecting a sense of joy on reunion with God in the afterlife (18). The categories 2, 4, and 5, which are related to God as secure base, have higher frequency of occurrence of responses than the other categories. Second, the percentage of participants giving responses under each category was: 98.6% for 1, 100% for 2, 20% for 3, 100% for 4, 87.1% for 5, 0% for 6, and 10% for 7. It is clear from this that the percentage of participation for the categories related to secure base (2, 4 & 5) was higher than the others. To summarize, the participants explored the environment since God's grace was over them.

Study 2

Next problem was to reduce the responses related to attachment to God on some meaning dimensions. Bartholomew, Cobb, and Poole (1997) have described four

category model of adult attachment relationships (personality styles): secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. However some investigators have argued that this fourfold typology can be reduced to two dimensions. Beck, and McDonald (2004) have conceptualized them as *avoidance* and *anxiety* dimensions as they apply to relationship with God. The second study explored the distribution of these two dimensions or traits in the sample.

Method: 70 educated, middle class, adults (54-60 years) of Hindu community served as subjects. These participants (35 males, 35 females) were different from those used in Study 1. In order to study the anxiety and avoidance dimensions of people, *The Attachment to God Inventory (AGI)* developed by Beck, and McDonald (2004) was used. This inventory consists of 28 items. Each item is rated along a 7-point Likert scale. From the total 28 items, item numbers 4, 8, 13, 18, 22, 26 and 28 are reverse scored. Even numbered items (total 14) measure avoidance, and odd numbered items (total 14) measure anxiety. For each dimension the maximum score is 98 and minimum score is 14. The inventory was administered individually by visiting the participants in their homes.

Results: The scores of 70 participants were used to construct two frequency distributions of attachment to God, one for anxiety dimension and the other for avoidance dimension. From these frequency distributions the frequency polygons for anxiety (Figure 1) and for avoidance (Figure 2) were drawn. The analysis of these frequency polygons revealed that they were not perfectly symmetrical, suggesting that the scores on these two dimensions are nearly normally distributed. For the dimension of anxiety the skewness was 0.724 and kurtosis was 0.261; the cases which lie on the right side from the perpendicular drawn from the highest point was 80.49% and that of the left side was 16.68%. For the dimension of avoidance the skewness was 0.13 and kurtosis was 0.218;

the cases which lie on the right side were 64.03% and for the left side it was 35.30%. For a normally distributed frequency polygon this percentage is almost equal, and in the present case the reasons for this asymmetry are possibly the errors of sampling, or the traits are not distributed normally in the population, or the responses cannot be reduced to these two dimensions.

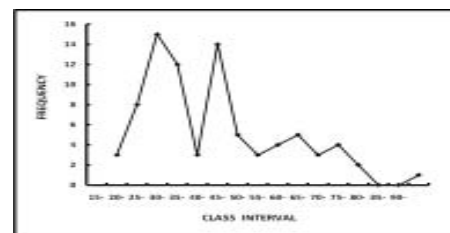


Figure 1: Distribution of scores on anxiety dimension of attachment to God.

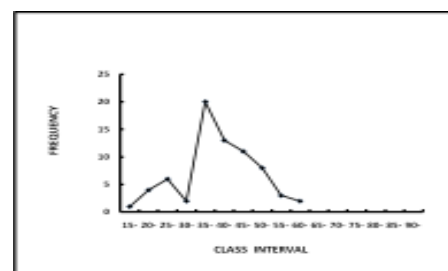


Figure 2: Distribution of scores on avoidance dimension of attachment to God.

Study 3

The central point of Bowlby's attachment theory is the idea of internal working models (IWMs), which develop during infant's cognitive growth (Ainsworth, & Bowlby, 1991). One way to understand these IWMs of an individual is to explore the relationship of attachment and memory (Simpson et al. 2007). The third study was planned to explore the memories related to God as a secure base using the priming technique (Robinson-Riegler, & Robinson-Riegler, 2008; Sternberg, 2007).

Method: The 35 males and 35 females used in Study 2 served as participants. These seventy participants were divided into *priming* and *no-priming* group (Figure 3). There are

several methods of priming (De Marree, Wheeler, & Petty, 2005; Ledgerwood, & Chaiken, 2007), in the present study the *scrambled sentence test* was used for priming. Two sets of scrambled sentences, having 10 sentences in each, were used. Each sentence contained 5 words arranged in scrambled manner. The subject has to rearrange the words to make a meaningful sentence with the help of 4 words, by eliminating the extra word. For the priming group, out of 10 sentences 5 were related to God and the remaining 5 were neutral. Whereas for the no-priming group all the 10 sentences were neutral. After the administration of scrambled sentence test to a participant, a *distractor task* was given to divert his/her attention from the previous task. Soon after this stimulus material was administered to participants, which was specifically prepared to elicit memories of God as a secure base. It was a *script* and was given according to continuous control association method (Woodworth, & Schlosberg, 1971). Same stimulus material was given to priming and no-priming group. The responses generated four dependent variables (Davis, 1999): *latency*, *number of memories recalled*, *categories generated*, and *number of items in each category*.

Results:

The priming group differed significantly from the no-priming group on the measure of

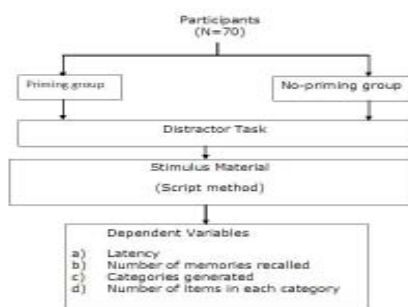


Figure 3: Experimental design of Study 3.

latency ($t = 0.68$; $df = 68$; $P < .05$). The average score for the priming group (1.94 ± 1.19)

was higher than the no-priming group (10.23 ± 9.81) (Figure 4). On the second measure, the number of memories recalled, the average score for priming group (18.77 ± 6.41) was significantly greater ($t = 1.55$; $df = 68$; $P < .5$) from the no-priming group (16.17 ± 7.52) (Figure 5). The responses of the participants were grouped under seven categories (L-location, Ch-character, Ob-object, Ac-action, Em-emotion, Si-situation, and O-other) to develop a measure, the number of categories generated. The analysis revealed that the average score for the priming group (5.14 ± 0.97) was significantly greater ($t = 2.32$; $df = 68$; $P < .05$) from the no-priming group (4.63 ± 0.87) (Figure 6). The fourth dependent variable was the number of items under each of the seven categories. The scores on this measure are shown in Figure 7.

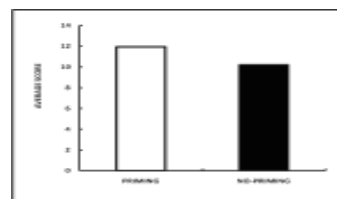


Figure 4: Latency for the recall of first association by the priming group and the no-priming group.

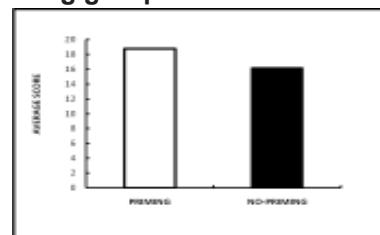


Figure 5: Number of items recalled by the priming group and the no-priming group.

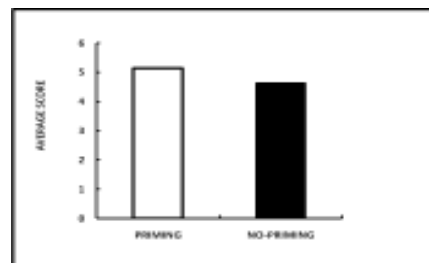


Figure 6: Number of categories recalled by the priming group and the no-priming group.

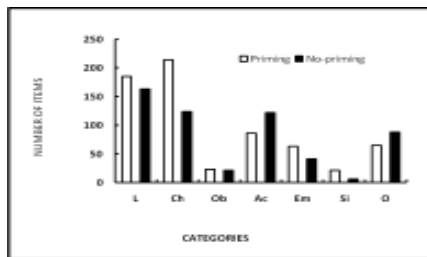


Figure 7: Number of items recalled within each category by the priming group and the no-priming group.

Discussion

Cognitive scientists are now exploring the questionable mental representations such as attachment to God (Faw 2006). In the present study, our main assumption was that during the course of development a person develops attachment to God or other deities, a generalization of the infant's relationship with the mother or care giver. The God or deity assumes the role of attachment figure. Kirkpatrick (1998) has argued that Bowlby's four criteria for attachment (Ainsworth, 1989) can be applied to the attachment to God: seeking and maintaining proximity to God, seeing God as a haven of safety, seeing God as a secure base, and responses to separation and loss. The secure base relationship was explored in the present study and the findings suggest that religious phenomena such as belief in God have important positive aspects, whereas in psychiatry these thoughts and their behavioral manifestations are considered as symptoms of negative deviance.

Various interdisciplinary groups are, however, exploring the supernatural beliefs to develop novel theories of human cognition involving Darwinian mechanisms (Boyer, 2003; Bering, 2006; Jones, 2009; Metzinger, 2005). Such endeavors need complimentary information on the social milieu where these religious beliefs and phenomena originate to serve specific functions. There are suggestions to inculcate religious and moral teachings for positive deviance—to infuse hope, to develop courage, to face adverse situations, to cope up with external threats,

and to enhance overall inner strength (Charney, 2004; Ray, 2004).

Considering the mammoth task and the financial input that mental health need in India, the alternative is to initiate community mental health movement in India through traditional institutions of deities that have served this function over a long period (Pirta, 2005, 2006). The findings of the present study support this argument. It provides evidence that God serves as a secure base for an individual to explore the external world. It has applied significance in the area of mental health where such cognitions have positive effect.

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