

Mortality Salience, Self-Esteem, and Attachment to Adults and God

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Current research on adult attachment suggests that there are two underlying dimensions of adult attachment—anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment anxiety refers to the degree to which adults are concerned with a desire for closeness and protection, and also their worries about the availability of and their worth to their partners. Avoidant attachment, on the other hand, refers to adults' discomfort with closeness to others, and their preference for self-reliance and emotional distance. Individuals can be high or low on either dimension relative to other adults, and those low on both dimensions are considered "securely attached."

Kirkpatrick (2005) has proposed that for theists a representation of God can serve as an attachment figure as well, and that the same two dimensions of attachment—anxiety and avoidance—can apply to this relationship. For example, individuals might worry about their closeness to God, and whether or not God will find them worthy of love (high anxiety), or they might feel very comfortable entering into a close relationship with their deity, with no concern about their reliance upon that deity for support (low avoidance).

The present research examines correspondence between the two types of attachment in the context of mortality salience effects. When individuals are primed for mortality salience—i.e., being made consciously aware of their mortality—they engage in processes such as self-esteem enhancement or validation of their worldview to cope with the anxiety that thoughts of their death provoke. Hart, Shaver, and Goldenberg (2005) found that threats to adult attachment resulted in defensive responses similar to those that occur with mortality salience, and Florian, Mikulincer, and Hirschberger (2002) found evidence that adult attachment acts as a buffer to the anxiety generated from mortality salience. In this study we examined whether attachment to God works in a similar fashion to adult attachment in attenuating the effects of mortality salience.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in a two-day study from 316 students from a Midwest liberal arts college who completed the measures in this study for credit in an undergraduate psychology class. Self-described atheists were removed from the sample since attachment to God would not be a relevant construct for them. This left 200 female and 91 male subjects, ranging in age from 17 to 31, with an average age of 19.

On day 1, participants first completed a desirability-of-traits scale (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), which assessed on a 1 (*extremely undesirable*) to 9 (*extremely desirable*) scale how desirable subjects found 8 individualistic traits (such as "self-reliant"; "original"; and "leader") and 8 collectivist traits (such as "self-sacrificing"; "cooperative"; and "loyal").

Participants also completed measures of adult attachment and attachment to God. The adult attachment measure was the Experiences in Close Relationships—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The two subscales of the ECR-R, anxiety and attachment, each contain 18 items and are responded to on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. The items on the anxiety subscale (e.g., "I worry a lot about my relationships") had an internal consistency reliability of .93, while the avoidance subscale items (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down") had a reliability of .94.

The Attachment to God Inventory (AGI; Beck & McDonald, 2004), like the ECR-R, has an anxiety subscale and an avoidance subscale, the items of which are responded to on the same 1 to 7 scale

as the ECR-R. The anxiety subscale of the Attachment to God Inventory is comprised of 14 items, such as “I often worry about whether God is pleased with me,” and had an internal consistency reliability of .90 in this study. The avoidance subscale of the AGI also contains 14 items (e.g., “I prefer not to depend too much on God”), and had a reliability of .92.

Finally, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a 10-item measure with a Cronbach’s alpha reliability of .89 in this study.

On day 2, participants were exposed to the mortality salience manipulation. Half of the subjects were randomly assigned to respond to two questions about their own death (what feelings the thought of their death arouses in them and what happens to them physically when they die). The other half of the subjects answered the same questions (about their feelings and physicality) regarding watching television. All subjects then rated themselves on a desirability of traits scale—on a 1-9 scale they rated how well each of the 16 traits from day 1 applied to them.

Results

Table 1 shows correlations among the day-one measures of adult attachment, attachment to God, and self-esteem. Attachment to God anxiety was positively correlated with adult attachment anxiety ($r(305)=.33, p<.001$) but not with adult avoidant attachment ($r(305) = .00, p = .96$), and avoidant attachment to God was positively correlated with adult attachment avoidance ($r(305)=.13, p=.02$), but not adult attachment anxiety ($r(305)=-.06, p=.29$). Self-esteem was negatively correlated with all four attachment scales (r ’s ranging from $-.12$ to $-.52$, all p ’s $< .05$).

Self-ratings for both individualistic and collectivist traits were subtracted from ratings of trait desirability and averaged to provide 2 indices of self-esteem. These difference scores were the dependent measures in four three-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs). The first, a mortality salience (high/low) by adult avoidance (high/low) by adult anxiety (high/low) ANOVA on the individualistic traits, revealed only one significant effect, a main effect for anxiety ($F(1, 290)=7.93, p=.005$): the difference between desirable and self-ratings for high anxious adults was greater (.20) than the difference for low anxious adults (-.13) (see Table 2). There was also a similar effect for adult anxiety in the mortality salience (high/low) by adult avoidance (high/low) by adult anxiety (high/low) ANOVA on collectivist traits ($F(1, 283)=9.82, p=.001$): the desirable-self-rating discrepancy for high anxiety subjects was greater (.61) than it was for low anxiety subjects (.20). This second ANOVA, however, also revealed a mortality salience by adult avoidant attachment interaction ($F(1, 283)=3.81, p=.03$). Simple effects analysis found a significant difference between high and low mortality salience conditions for the high avoidant subjects (.31 vs. .64, respectively), but no such difference in the low avoidant subjects (.42 vs. .26) (see Table 3).

The second two ANOVAs incorporated attachment to God instead of adult attachment. The first, a mortality salience (high/low) by attachment to God avoidance (high/low) by attachment to God anxiety (high/low) ANOVA on the individualistic traits, revealed a main effect for attachment to God anxiety ($F(1, 282)=4.13, p=.03$): the difference between desirable and self-ratings for high anxious adults was greater (.15) than the difference for low anxious adults (-.09) (see Table 2). The three-way ANOVA performed on the collectivist data also revealed only one significant effect, also with attachment to God anxiety ($F(1, 282)=8.46, p=.002$). Once again, the desirable-self-rating difference was greater for those high in anxiety (.51) than it was for those low in anxiety (.17).

Discussion

Our data provide some evidence for the correspondence between adult attachment and attachment to God. Attachment to God avoidance and anxiety scales were positively correlated with their respective adult attachment scales, and all four scales were negatively correlated with day-one self-esteem. Additionally, for both individualistic and collectivist traits, subjects higher in both adult anxiety and attachment to God anxiety showed greater desirability-self-rating discrepancies than did subjects lower in those two types of attachment anxiety.

However, there was no evidence found for a mortality-salience buffering effect of attachment to God. As mentioned above, Florian et al (2002) found evidence that adult attachment provided a buffer against the effects of mortality salience. Our data are partially supportive of this: for highly avoidant adults, being made aware of one's mortality led to greater concordance between desirability and self-ratings on collectivist traits than it did for individuals for whom mortality was not made salient. No such differences existed for low-avoidant participants.

Most relevant for the present research, however, there were no mortality salience interactions with either attachment to God scale for either individualistic or collectivist traits. Previous research has suggested correspondence between adult attachment and attachment to God (e.g., Beck & McDonald, 2004), and McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy, (2005), and we found some evidence of such correspondence in the present study. These data on mortality salience suggest at least one domain, however, in which adult attachment and attachment to God exert differential psychological effects.

References

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Table 1
Correlations Among Attachment to God, Adult Attachment, and Self-Esteem

	<u>Self-Esteem</u>	<u>Adult Attach. Avoid</u>	<u>Adult Attach. Anxiety</u>	<u>Attach. to God Avoidance</u>
<u>Attach. to God Anxiety</u>	-.30 _c	-.03	.33 _c	-.18 _b
<u>Attach. To God Avoid.</u>	-.12 _a	.13 _a	-.06	
<u>Adult Attach. Anxiety</u>	-.52 _c	.41 _c		
<u>Adult Attach. Avoidance</u>	-.34 _c			

a: $p < .05$ b: $p < .01$ c: $p < .001$

Table 2
Average desirability-self discrepancies for individuals high and low in adult attachment avoidance and anxiety and high and low in attachment to God anxiety and avoidance.

<u>Collectivist Traits</u>					
<u>Adult Attachment Anxiety</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>St. Err.</u>	<u>Attachment to God Anxiety</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>St. Err.</u>
High Anxiety	.61 _a	.08	High Anxiety	.51 _a	.08
Low Anxiety	.20 _a	.08	Low Anxiety	.17 _a	.08
<u>Individualistic Traits</u>					
<u>Adult Attachment Anxiety</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>St. Err.</u>	<u>Attachment to God Anxiety</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>St. Err.</u>
High Anxiety	.22 _b	.09	High Anxiety	.15 _b	.08
Low Anxiety	-.13 _b	.08	Low Anxiety	-.09 _b	.08

Note: Means in a column with the same subscript differ at the $p < .05$ level of significance.

Table 3

Average collectivist desirability-self discrepancies for individuals high and low in adult avoidance attachment and who were or were not exposed to a mortality salience prompt.

<u>Low Adult Attachment Avoidance</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>St. Err.</u>	<u>High Adult Attachment Avoidance</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>St. Err.</u>
High Mortality Salience	.42	.13	High Mortality Salience	.31 _a	.11
Low Mortality Salience	.26	.11	Low Mortality Salience	.64 _a	.12

Note: Means in a column with the same subscript differ at the $p < .05$ level of significance.