

The Relationship between Styles of Attachment to God and Forgiveness and Empathy among Female Students in the City of Qom

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Forgiveness and empathy are factors which are influential in improving the relationships between people, themselves can be affected by various factors in turn. The purpose of this research was to investigate the relationship between the styles of attachment to God and forgiveness and empathy among female students in the city of Qom.

Methods: 250 students were selected from the city of Qom by cluster sampling. Three questionnaires were used: styles of attachment to God by Kirkpatrick and Rowatt, emotional empathy by Mehrabian and Epstein and forgiveness inventory by Enzeit. Pearson correlation and Regression analysis were used for data analysis.

Results: The style of secure attachment to God had a significantly positive relationship with forgiveness and empathy. Furthermore, the style of avoidant attachment to God and the style of bilateral attachment to God had a significantly negative relationship with forgiveness. In addition, the standard coefficients of all three predictive variables (Secure attachment, bilateral and avoidant to God) were all significant at $p=0.05$. Assessment and recognition of the style of attachment to God, the students and its relation with forgiveness and empathy can have valuable implications in providing the mental health of the students.

Conclusion: The findings of this research show a connection between the style of attachment to God and forgiveness and empathy, indicate the clarification of attachment to God in students' forgiveness and empathy. Based on the findings, it can be suggested that the theory of attachment to God can be used in psychotherapy.

Keywords: Attachment to God, Empathy, Forgiveness, Spirituality

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Introduction

Attachment, according to Bowlby, is a deep emotional connection between people in which the individual has a special feeling of happiness and security when interacting with other individuals (1). Based on Bowlby's theory, this cordial relation takes its shape from the beginning of birth between the newborn and his/her caregiver and is both emotional and physical (1). Ainsworth -by inventing the unknown situation and based on the observation of relations between the parent and the child- has described three patterns of secure attachment, emotional attachment and avoidant attachment (2). Adults, who are secure, feel intimate with others and have the ability to trust others while loving and valuing themselves. Contrary to this group, the anxious adults have

variable behavior and excitement towards attachment and are too much attached to the point that they often worry about being deserted and losing lovers. Avoidant adults also feel less committed to others and do not trust people around them, but make themselves look good in front of others (3). Research has shown that the style of secure attachment is related to quality of the relationship (4), increasing positive emotions, methods of reaching agreement correspondingly and decreasing negative emotions (5), friendly relations with people (6), while the styles of attachment, avoidance and anxiety are related to the consumption of alcohol and drug abuse (7). The concept of attachment has many dimensions one of which is related to religion and belief (8). Kirkpatrick,

believes that the conditions of attachment that Bowlby has brought up in the mother-child relations are the same as the ones between man and God, which indicate God is a manifestation of attachment (9). Bowlby, has enumerated three kinds of conditions that activate the attachment system resulting in children approaching attachment: 1) environmentally anxious events 2) physical or emotional illnesses 3) separation or the lack of attachment (10). Studies by Kirkpatrick and Shaver have also mentioned the fundamental elements based on which man approaches God under such circumstances as:

1) Stressful and painful events 2) Losing a loved one 3) Physical-emotional illnesses (11).

As is clear, there are a lot of similarities between elements which according to Bowlby activate the child's attachment to mother and child and Kirkpatrick's elements that activate behavior of attachment to God. Thus, it can be concluded that God is an attachment symbol. Beck believes that those who are more attached to God, and which is of a secure kind, suffer less from tension and depression and feel more satisfied and happy (12). Also, in a research that was conducted on members of a church by Mat Bradshaw et al. it was pointed out that there was an inverse relationship between secure attachment to God and distress and that anxious attachment to God was positively related to distress (13). Furthermore, secure attachment to God is positively related to emotional tolerance (14). According to research, there has been a high level of correlation between a person's positive perception of God and good interpersonal relations (15). One of the mechanisms that can help improve interpersonal relations is forgiveness which has multiple meanings. However, there is an agreement that forgiveness means moving from negative thoughts, behavior and distinction towards the positive ones (16). Understanding forgiveness is as important as its functioning because there are actions that are similar to forgiveness, but in fact they are not; instances such as forgiveness, justification, denying the harm done and forgetting or claiming forgetting are damaging events. Although these instances are labeled as forgiveness, none of them has the real

advantages of forgiveness (17). In threatening situations, the forgiveness process will be facilitated by the style of secure attachment (18, 19). In a research on 200 couples, the results indicated that those couples whose style of attachment for both was secure, their rate of forgiveness was higher compared to the couples whose style of attachment for both was insecure and or one of them was secure and the other one was insecure (20). In addition, Lawler-Row et al. investigated the role of the style of attachment and forgiveness of an offender in a close relation and according to the results, the young adults with the secure style of attachment had more forgiveness compared to the young adults who had an insecure style of attachment (21). In a research conducted on 140 Israelis, Mikulincer et al. concluded that both anxious and avoidant attachments decrease forgiveness (22). It should be mentioned that, one of the components of forgiveness is empathy (23). Dymond considers empathy to be a cognitive phenomenon and regards an empathizer as a person who can accept another person's role visually and understand his/her thoughts and emotions and predict them correctly (24). Cognitive empathy has also been discussed as a theory of the mind or perspective-taking. Children and adolescents who have more empathy are more sympathetic to others; they are more sensitive and are concerned about not hurting others. They show positive emotions towards others and have positive physical interactions with them. They get engaged in positive conversation and are sensitive about how to conduct a non-verbal communication (25). Empathy does not give the individual the opportunity to coordinate his/her behavior with how others feel towards them; they are incapable of having contacts with those around them and refrain from hurting them (26). In a research about nurses, it was determined that secure attachment has a significantly positive correlation with empathy and insecure attachment has a significantly negative correlation with empathy (27). Moreover, in a research on people who were mourning over the loss of a loved one, the results showed that those individuals who got lower scores in avoidant attachment (individuals feeling more secure) had more empathy and also there was no

Table 1. Corresponding correlation matrix of forgiveness and attachment to God

Variables	Mean± SD	Correlation		
		Forgiveness	Secure Attachment to God	Avoidant Attachment to God
Forgiveness	238.57±58.33	1		
Secure Attachment to God	14.69±4.32	0.47*	1	
Avoidant Attachment to God	10.16±6.19	-0.49*	-0.46*	1
Bilateral Attachment to God	11.63±5.82	-0.49*	-0.36*	0.66*

*: P < 0.01

connection between anxious attachment and empathy (28). Taking into account the importance of empathy and its impact on adolescent's future, unfortunately, it has been noticed that researchers and authorities have ignored it and not enough attention has been paid to this and adolescent's empathetic behavior. Therefore, the focus of this study is on the analysis of the connection between attachment and forgiveness and empathy.

Methods

This research is a descriptive cross-sectional one and its population includes all the female students in vocational schools in the city of Qom during the academic year of 2013-2014. The number of students in this research was 250 selected by random clustering sampling. First, the samples of vocational schools were randomly selected and then the classes were randomly chosen for the research. After explaining the goals of the research and receiving informed consent from the students, the questionnaires were given to the students to voluntarily complete them. Those students who were not willing to participate in the research were free to fill out the questionnaires. Data analysis was done via SPSS software using descriptive methods, Pearson correlation coefficient and Regression analysis. The tools for data collection included two questionnaires about attachment styles by Kirkpatrick and Rowatt, emotional empathy by Mehrabian and Epstein and Enright Forgiveness Inventory.

The scale of the style of attachment to God

Kirkpatrick and Rowatt have provided the new multi-dimensional scale of attachment to God that includes 9 items. In this scale every three items describes one of the styles of attachment to God in which the respondents are asked to answer how close they are to God. The scope of

agreement ranges from 1 as (totally against) to 7 as (totally for). The Cronbach Alpha by Kirkpatrick and Rowatt about the sub-scale of "avoidance" was reported to be 92% and the sub-scale of anxiety was 80% (29). The internal consistency between secure avoidance and bilateral attachments in Sepahmansoor et al. was 85%, 69% and 74%, respectively (30).

Mehrabian and Epstein Empathy Scale

To measure the empathy scale, Mehrabian and Epstein Empathy Scale was used. This questionnaire was designed to assess adults' emotional empathy which includes 33 items to be answered in a 5-degree Likert scale. The score of 5 is given to the "very agreeable" response and 1 to the response of "totally disagreeable". Mehrabian and Epstein examined the validity of this questionnaire through its correlation with the amount of disputing and helping behavior which according to the theories, had a negative correlation with disputing and a positive one with helping behavior. Its construct validity has been confirmed as well. Using Split-half method, they calculated the reliability coefficient (alpha) of the questionnaire to be 84% (24).

Enright Forgiveness Inventory

To assess the rate of forgiveness, Enright Forgiveness Inventory and the Group for Human Evolution Studies were utilized (31). The psychometric specifications of this questionnaire are as follows: according to the results, the questionnaire with 66 items shows a high internal reliability (98%) and appropriate validity (correlation with the standard question was about 62%). Furthermore, after comparing with the Iranian culture and the elimination of repetitive questions, the number of items has been reduced to 60 and with appropriate validity (its criterion validity was about 62%) and reliability indexes (internal reliability about

Table 2. corresponding correlation matrix of empathy and attachment to God

Variables	Mean± SD	Correlation		
		Empathy	Secure Attachment to God	Avoidant Attachment to God
Empathy	211.04±32.34	1		
Secure Attachment to God	14.69±4.32	0.37	1	
Avoidant Attachment to God	10.16±6.19	-0.42	-0.46	1
Bilateral Attachment to God	11.63±5.82	-0.38	-0.36	0.66

96%) (32). Enright et al. suggested validation indexes for their 60-item forgiveness inventory which is briefly shown below: the correlation between the cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions was between 80% to 87%. The statistical specifications and the validity of this test indicate that this test has a high validity. Its validity for the entire test estimated via Cronbach alpha is 98% and for its triple domains, it is 97% (31).

Result

To analyze the data and test the theories of the research, at first Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between the variables of the research. The results of Pearson correlation coefficient among the variables of the research showed that secure attachment to God had a significantly positive correlation with forgiveness ($r=0.47, p<0.01$). Also, avoidant attachment to God ($r=-0.49, p<0.01$) and bilateral attachment to God ($r=-0.49, p<0.01$) had a significantly negative correlation with forgiveness (Table 1).

For the other variable, likewise, first the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between the variables of the research. The results of Pearson correlation coefficient between the variables of the research indicated that secure attachment to God had a significantly positive relationship with empathy ($r=0.37, p<0.01$). Moreover, avoidant

attachment to God ($r=-0.42, p<0.01$) and bilateral attachment to God ($r=-0.38, p<0.01$) had a significantly negative relationship with empathy (Table 2).

In order to predict forgiveness based on the pre-determined variable in the styles of attachment to God (secure, bilateral and avoidant), a step-by-step Regression was used whose results are shown in table 3.

As can be seen in the table, in the first place, the style of bilateral attachment to God has entered the predicted equation and clarifies 24.2% of all the forgiveness changes by itself , the amount is significant at the significance level of $p=0.05$.

In the second place, the style of security has entered the projected equation because of which the rate of co-efficiency selection has increased from 24.2% to 33.9%. The standard coefficients of both projected variables are significant.

In the third place, the avoidant style has entered the projected equation because of which the rate of co-efficiency selection has increased from 33.9% to 35.4%. The projected standard coefficients of all three variables are significant.

To predict empathy, the basis of projected variables between styles of attachment to God (secure, avoidant, and bilateral), a step-by-step Regression was used whose results are shown in table 4.

Table 3. analysis of hierarchical Regression for prediction of forgiveness based on styles of attachments to God

Step	Variables	R	R2	F	B	T
1	Style of Bilateral attachment to God	0.49	0.24	84.64	-0.49	-9.20*
2	Style of Bilateral attachment to God	0.58	0.33	67.68	-0.37	-6.96*
	Style of Secure attachment to God				0.33	6.22*
3	Style of Bilateral attachment to God	0.59	0.35	48.14	-0.27	-4.15*
	Style of Secure attachment to God				0.28	5.13*
	Style of Avoidant attachment to God				-0.17	-2.52*

* P < 0.05

Table 4. Brief analysis of hierarchical Regression for prediction of empathy based on styles of attachment to God

Step	Variables	R	R2	F	B	T
1	Style of Avoidant attachment to God	0.42	0.18	56.51	-0.42	-7.52*
2	Style of Avoidant attachment to God	0.46	0.21	35.74	-0.32	-5.18*
	Style of Secure attachment to God				0.22	3.54*
3	Style of Avoidant attachment to God	0.48	0.23	26.04	-0.21	-2.18*
	Style of Secure attachment to God				0.21	3.37*
	Style of Bilateral attachment to God				-0.17	-2.34*

* P < 0.05

As can be seen in the table, in the first step, the style of avoidant attachment to God has entered the projected equation and explicates 17.6% of forgiveness changes by itself and this figure is significant.

In the second step, the style of security has entered the projected equation and as a result, the rate of coefficient selection has increased from 17.6% to 21.3%. The standard coefficients of both projected variables are significant.

In the third step, the bilateral style has entered the projected equation and as a result, the rate of coefficient selection has increased from 21.3% to 22.9%. The standard coefficients of all three projected variables are significant.

Discussion

In the present research, the results of Pearson correlation coefficient between the variables of the research showed that the style of secure attachment to God has a significantly positive relationship with forgiveness.

In addition, the style of avoidant attachment to God and the style of bilateral attachment to God has a significantly negative relationship with forgiveness.

Besides, the standard coefficients of all three predictive variables (secure attachment to God, bilateral attachment to God and avoidant attachment to God) are significant at the significance level of ($p=0.05$). The findings of the current research and those by Khosravi et al. showed those couples whose style of attachment was secure, were more forgiving than those couples whose style of attachment was safe for one and unsafe for the other (20). In addition, the results of the current research conforms with those of a research conducted by Lawler-Row et al. who showed that young adults having a style of secure attachment were more forgiving compared to young adults with a style of

insecure attachment (21). Anxious attachment and avoidant attachment will both decrease or increase forgiveness. To shed light on the above-mentioned findings, it can be said that there are important similarities between the theories of attachment and forgiveness and both include components such as trust, connection, empathy, emotional independence and an intricate set of psychological changes which focus on themselves and others such as wrongdoers (20), as mentioned before (5). In threatening situations, the process of forgiveness will be facilitated through secure attachment (18, 19). People having a secure attachment can increase their tolerance at the time of having tensions, which means that there is less possibility of having emotional and behavioral disturbances when facing problems (33). Insecure people cannot forgive others because of the lack of empathy and control of their negative emotions. It is worth mentioning that in this research, Pearson correlation coefficients between the variables of the research indicated a significantly positive correlation between the style of secure attachment to God and empathy.

The style of avoidant attachment to God and the style of bilateral attachment to God have a significantly negative correlation with empathy, not to mention that the standard coefficients of all three predictive variables (secure attachment to God, bilateral attachment to God and avoidant attachment to God) are significant at ($p=0.05$), which agree with the findings of the research by Khodabakhsh conducted on nurses in which the style of secure attachment had a significantly positive correlation with empathy and the style of insecure attachment had a significantly negative correlation with empathy (27). Moreover, these findings are in tandem with the findings of the research by Wayment

conducted on people who were mourning over the death of a loved one. Based on the results, people who had lower scores in avoidant attachment (meaning individuals who were more secure) had more empathy (28). For the clarification of these findings, it can be said that individuals with secure attachment assumed their relations with other people to be stable, accessible and corresponding. Therefore, they experience more success in creating and maintaining successful relations with others and consequently form a sense of trust towards the other party, which, in turn, causes the creation of the capacity to respond positively and empathically in the future relationships (27).

Since attachment forms the way through which an individual perceives things and interacts with the environment, its being secure plays an important role in the growth of personality and society-oriented behavior. There seems to be a relationship between attachment and empathy too. One of the components that plays an essential role in the process of being accepted by the society is the empathy between individuals. Empathy is the master key for the formation of non-aggressive and society-oriented behavior (34).

Conclusion

Theoretically speaking, the findings of this research show the connection between the style of attachment to God and forgiveness and empathy, which indicate the clarification of attachment to God in students' forgiveness and empathy. It also shows that the theory of attachment to God can be used in psychotherapy. Since only the students from the city of Qom participated in this research, generalization of the results of this research to other groups should be done with caution.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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