

God as an Attachment Figure: A Case Study of the God Attachment Language and God Concepts of Anxiously Attached Christian Youths in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the Christian God as an attachment figure, using the attachment language criteria of a strong and enduring affectionate bond. Respondents were 15 anxiously attached Christian youths, purposefully selected for in-depth interviews to explore their God attachment language and God concepts. The results show how the respondents saw God as a target for their proximity-seeking behaviors, albeit conflicted in their relationship experience. They also used some form of metaphorical theology that represented God to them as either stronger or wiser, as a safe haven for security, or as a response to their internal conflict.

KEYWORDS

African youth attachment;
God attachment language;
God concepts and
metaphoric theology; God
experience; God
representation

Introduction

In recent years, studies on God attachment have been of great importance in the field of psychology of religion and theology (Counted, 2015a, 2015b; Davis, 2010; Granqvist, 1998; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992; McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy, 2005; Rizzuto, 1979). These studies are merely emphasizing and re-emphasizing the models of psychoanalytic development (Freud, 1913) and object-relations theories (Bowlby, 1969; Rizzuto, 1979). These studies have formed the foundational basis for attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Rizzuto, 1979) from which researchers now study God attachment, God images, and even identity formation (Barry, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010; Counted, 2015a; Davis, 2010). Although attachment theory was traditionally ascribed to John Bowlby, it has been described in the recent years as the joint work of Bowlby and Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The basic tenet surrounding the theory is concepts ranging from ethology, cybernetics, information processing, developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis (Bretherton, 1992, p.759). Scholars like Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990), Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008), Noffke and Hall (2007), Davis (2010), and Counted

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(2015a) have equally advanced the development of this field via empirical studies.

A range of assessment instruments have been developed to measure people's relationship experience with God from an attachment-based framework (Beck & McDonald, 2004). These attachment-related instruments allow researchers to assess an individual's attachment relationship with God on the grounds of avoidance of intimacy with God, anxiety about abandonment by God, or a disorganized pattern where the individual is both fearful and dismissing of their relationship with God.

Many of the empirical research outputs in this area have attempted to address God attachment from a quantitative angle in relation to the attachment relationship experience of different scientific communities (Beck, 2006; Davis, 2010; Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, Hill, & Delaney, 2009). Although the quantitative study is important, there seems to be an urgent need to supply and complement this area of study with qualitative narratives that would furnish the empirical gap in qualitative case studies on God attachment, especially to give account to the role of God in an attachment relationship as a safe haven, a secure base, a target for proximity, as stronger and wiser, and as a response to attachment separation and loss. The present study constructs a narrative with 15 purposefully selected Christian youths, who earlier¹ reported high levels of God-attachment-anxiety, to explain this experience, as will become clear.

Attachment figures

Attachment figures (AFs) are central to the core of attachment theory, and inferences are often made on how experiences with AFs influence and help us understand human relationships (Counted, 2015b; Davis, 2010; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008). Attachment theorists argue generally that the mental representations of the self in relation to others, developed from a parent-child relationship, are actively reflected in a child's social relationships, even unto adulthood (Bowlby, 1988; Davis, 2010; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). This mental representation of self is what Bowlby (1969) called the internal working models (IWMs). The IWMs, according to Bowlby (1969, 1988), initially develop through early childhood experiences with parents, but remain open to modification and specification across a lifetime through contact and dealings with close others such as friends, parents, partners, religious symbols, or a deity who serve as substitute attachment figures (SAFs). A relationship with a SAF often become strengthened over time and develops into a strong and enduring relationship bond that makes the SAF a dominant AF (Bowlby, 1988; Davis, 2010; Siegel, 1999).

Bowlby (1973) understood IWMs as the image of self, others, and self-with-others. Given that, IWMs of a person inform how an individual relates

to others, which is also reflected in their relationship experience with an AF. AFs convey positive images of safety, emotional meaning, and security in relation to the associated emotional needs an individual need to satiate.

Furthermore, IWMs point to the allegiance of self in relation to another, particularly an AF. It also examines the availability and responsiveness of an AF to impulses of support and protection from an individual. This attachment structure impels the caregiver or AF to function as a secure base from where the individual engages the world in exploration (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

AFs are seen as sources from where a “seeker” explores the world around them. Parents and early caregivers usually fall within this category of AFs. However, separation from an early AF often results in an anxiety of abandonment or avoidance of intimacy if such relationship is lost (Ainsworth, 1989). When the relationship is lost the individual often, in an attempt to heal and find emotional meaning, finds help and safety in the embrace of another attachment symbol/object that may serve as an AF (e.g., Counted, 2016b, argued that a relationship can also be formed with a spatial setting in this context of self-exploration). This is where a relationship with an SAF shapes a new attachment identity for the individual. Such SAF, for the time being, can serve as an AF.

Relatively speaking, the relationship between an AF and an individual leads to a long-lasting attachment bond. Often AFs are irreplaceable in one’s life, given that attached individuals often look up to them for proximity, security, safety, and emotional healing. According to Lee Kirkpatrick (1986), the relationship with God can be described as an attachment bond where an individual sees God as an AF, especially when a human attachment figure is not available.

Albeit seldom, according to Bowlby (1988), the quality of a person’s attachment system is determined by the history of interactions and the extent to which a person depends on an AF as a source of security and comfort (Bowlby, 1988). Real life events and situations such as divorce, separation, loss, betrayal, abandonment, illness, or the inability to practice affection, according to attachment theorists (Davis, 2010; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008), can likewise interfere with the natural bonding process between individuals and their AFs. This kind of inconsistency or difficulty in attachment relationships disrupts the attachment process, thus making the individual to adopt a coping defense mechanism—a way to deal with a difficult attachment experience to down-regulate their attachment crisis (Counted, 2015a). Naturally this depends on which coping style has been most effective for healing the severity of abandonment experienced during childhood (Gardner & Stevens, 1982). On the one hand, the applied coping style transmutes either into an insecure attachment tendency of self-reliance or distrusting of others. On the other hand, the individual could either compensate for a relationship abuse they had

with an AF via another AF, or substantiate such relationship, especially when access and proximity to an AF was consistent. However, this happens only seldomly (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008). Usually, the individual either adopts an attachment-anxiety, attachment-avoidant, or a disorganized attachment style (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Solomon, 1986).

Consequently, when an AF does not respond with affection in an attachment relationship the individual will grow up eventually with either an insecure or secure attachment orientation, compensating for a lost relationship or corresponding a previous relationship experience. In a bid to re-embrace what was missed during such relationship experience the individual searches for security, emotional meaning or comfort, or safety in a new AF, such as God. God then replaces the previous AF and thus plays a new role in the life of such individual as a SAF and an AF.

God as an attachment figure

Attachment theorists and psychologists of religion associate religious experience in terms of a relationship between self and others (Kirkpatrick, 2005). This relationship, as argued before, is shaped by the contact experience with an early caregiver from which the individual forms their IWMs for relations with close others. A close other is seen as an AF which an individual turns to for emotional meaning, security, and safety (Counted, 2015b; Davis, 2010).

The mental or neural representations of self and others guide a person's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning, both in their relationship with God and close others (Bowlby, 1969; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). This mental representation(s) of self and others is what Bowlby (1969) calls IWMs. As discussed earlier, the IWMs develop through early childhood experiences with parents or early caregivers, but remain open to modification and specification across a life space through contact and dealings with SAFs. Ultimately, when forming new relationships with SAFs, the availability and responsiveness of a SAF, for example God, to impulses of support and protection from an individual can authenticate a SAF as an AF in such experience.

Usually, a religious believer's experience in a relationship with a deity or God is said to be an attachment relationship, one in which the believer sees God or the deity as a divine attachment figure (DAF) and a reliable companion (Kirkpatrick, 2005). This way of experiencing God as a DAF enables the religious believer to see God within the context of attachment language criteria. Granqvist and Kirkpatrick, in their 2008 study, suggested what these criteria might look like in reality. However, there are individual differences in God attachment language experiences² based on the relative parental attachment influence or background on a person's spirituality or religious experience. Nevertheless, the defining attachment language criteria

for describing an attachment relationship between someone who believes in God and their DAF would represent God, based on the account of Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008), as (a) a target for proximity or maintenance of closeness, (b) a safe haven and secure base, (c) a response to separation and loss, and (d) as stronger and wiser than themselves. When God is experienced as personal in a relationship and has a considerable impact on a person's sense of identity and their capacity to deal with a perceived emotional crisis, then such attachment experience ought to embody an attachment language standard that represents an enduring and strong affectionate bond.

But frankly, how does a religious believer experience God as an AF based on the attachment language criteria stated previously? Kirkpatrick (2005) gave us a clue to the answer as he suggested that the knowledge of how an attachment system operates in human relationships should guide us in understanding how people experience and interact with God as an AF. The next section in this article will help us to solve this practical concern, as we journey to the world of Christian youths to see how they experience God as an AF using the parameters of the attachment language criteria.

The present study

This study was an attempt to explore how Christian youths experience God as an AF using the God attachment language criteria in relation to Granqvist and Kirkpatrick's (2008) understanding of a strong and enduring relationship, in which God is seen as wiser and stronger, a target for proximity, a secure base and safe haven, and a response to separation and loss. Since attachment theorists argue that a parent-child relationship shapes the relationship experience of individuals, the study shows empirical evidence that supports how the caregiver experience in a parent-child relationship is reflected in an individual's relationship experience with God.

Moreover, the study also explores how the respondents used metaphoric theology in relation to their God concepts, in the form of religious language with allegorical meanings, to respond to and regulate their God-attachment experiences. God was discussed in this article as an AF possessing the capacity to provide both emotional meaning and comfort for the respondents based on their application of God concepts and accommodation of their attachment-to-God experiences.

Methods

An empirical case study design was used to collect data by way of in-depth interviews with 15 Christian youths ($N = 15$) of various racial backgrounds whom are members of different youth groups in different church traditions

in Stellenbosch, Western Cape South Africa. The interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed into Word documents. Afterwards interview data were deconstructed for possible themes.

The respondents were selected based on a purposeful sampling technique with the help of the respective churches involved to ensure robustness and convergence of knowledge in the findings in a way that reliably support the respondents' use of their God attachment language. The 15 respondents were part of an earlier self-report quantitative survey carried out by the same researcher using the Attachment to God Inventory where they scored high on God attachment anxiety. The quantitative study is not reported in this article. However, it is important to note that prior to the face-to-face in-depth interviews, the researcher and the respondents established rapport as they were informed that the discussion would be tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In order to avoid the risk of making the respondents identifiable, pseudonyms were given to them during the data analysis procedure to assure confidentiality and keep to their anonymity (cf. Corden & Sainsbury, 2006, p. 22). While analyzing the research data, the researcher took a deductive approach in the data analysis procedure to see how the experiences of the participants related to and confirmed the attachment language criteria used in the study while also noting new patterns of thought. The study applied a deductive approach rather than an inductive approach because qualitative enquiries that are based on inductive approach "most often remain untested" (Hyde, 2000, p. 84). In order for the structure of analysis in the study to be operationalized based on established knowledge, the researcher employed a deductive procedure. Although most qualitative research follows an inductive process, whereas the deductive approach is more commonly used in quantitative research, there are no set rules on this. In fact, due to the scarcity of sources and the risk involved in engaging in an inductive research procedure, researchers like Hyde have argued that the "adoption of formal deductive procedures can represent an important step towards assuring conviction in qualitative research findings" (p. 82). Hyde therefore urged researchers to consider introducing deductive procedures in qualitative research due to its ability to test existing theories and equally match patterns of thoughts and themes emerging from a given research. Ultimately, expanding a previous knowledge background through the deductive procedure as applied in this study has helped me to avoid any risk of reaching false conclusions. By applying a deductive approach to confirming the attachment language criteria for an enduring and affective bond already established in the literature review, the in-depth interviews allowed me to carefully identify and quickly explain selected themes relevant to attachment theory.

The contents of the open-ended questions used to retrieve data consequently helped to elaborate and confirm previous empirical and theoretical works done by attachment researchers worldwide. The interview protocol was pilot tested on two Christian youths purposefully selected outside the study sample. The pilot interview analysis helped me to somewhat revise the order of the questions and improve the interview protocol questions. During the interview sessions, respondents adequately reported their God-attachment experiences using some form of metaphorical theology (in form of “God concepts,” see Counted, 2015b; Vergote, 1969), which tally with the attachment language criteria of Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008).

Findings and discussions: assessing the God attachment language?

An enduring and strong affectionate bond between an individual and God would have some elements of attachment language, as the attached individual tries to verbalize their experiential knowledge of God in different emotional contexts. Often the God-attachment language can be categorized using the attachment language criteria provided by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008), which structures an AF as:

- a target for proximity or maintenance of closeness;
- a safe haven or a secure base;
- a response to separation or loss;
- as stronger or wiser.

Hence, this is how we see God playing a role as an AF. What is interesting in this research, however, is to note how the respondents used some sort of metaphorical theology in the form of God concepts or religious language to describe and give a clue to their God attachment language, especially as they try to cope with their attachment tension and conflict with God, and test their actual life against what is most essential to it (Dykstra, 1986). Lawrence (1997) understood the God concept as a person’s cognitive understanding of God (i.e., what a person learns about God through perception, learning, and reasoning). This is a cognitive action skillfully done through religious-related learning and gathering. The God concept (Counted, 2015b) or religious language (Dykstra, 1986) is an indication of a religious faith, or a cognitive understanding of God (Hoffman, 2000), which indicates a certain level of connectedness, identification, or socialization with a DAF within a community of faith. Dykstra put it this way, “Religious faith as a way of life is borne, necessarily, by language and each distinct way of life necessarily has a language of its own,” (1986, p. 170). Both the God attachment language

and God concept develop adjacent to one another, yet through different patterns. The God attachment language is through what we experience and use to express an affectionate bond with an AF, whereas the God concept is developed through what we are taught and often used to amplify the presence of a God-attachment language. As we carefully observe the respondents' experiences of the divine by using the attachment language criteria discussed previously, we will also pay close attention to see how the God concept or the religious voice used by the respondents exerts the power to reinforce and regulate their God attachment experiences.

Connected but conflicted: God as a target for proximity seeking

Connected

It was interesting to see how the respondents used some form of symbolic languages to describe their proximity with God. The language expression of the respondents, therefore, can be an indication of their relationship or connection with a DAF. You cannot, for example, be close to someone if you are not connected to that person in some way, and evidently communication is the hallmark of every successful relationship (Arnold & Boggs, 1999). Often this communication is expressed through metaphors, symbolic languages, or even God concepts (Counted, 2015b). Therefore, words used in expressing a God attachment experience can constitute the language structure for understanding the God attachment language of a given faith community. Such words are often indicators that suggest an identification or proximity with God. Without these indicators that comprise the God attachment language of a believer there is no attachment experience, and therefore no proximity or relationship experience with God (Counted, 2015b). Louw (2000) saw vocabularies playing an important role in helping a sufferer feel God's closeness and presence in the place of conflict. According to Louw, vocabularies justify and explain God's presence and purpose to an individual in conflict.

At a personal level, an indicator of closeness or proximity in a relationship experience with God can be captured through language symbols, metaphors, or words, and clearly shows the extent to which a perceiver tends to see God in a dyadic relationship.

Against this background, I attempt to come to grips with how the respondents' degree of closeness with God is reflected in their expressions, which perhaps represent their proximity with God, hence satisfying the first God attachment language criteria of an enduring attachment bond.

I saw the respondents confirm their proximity with God using the following words:

My relationship with God is in the perfect condition. (Andy)

I trust in God with my whole life. God definitely exist you just wonder why bad things happen to such good people. Sometimes this shakes the way I feel about God but I still have a personal relationship with Him and I feel that I trust him. (Cara)

I feel good in my relationship with God generally because of His grace for me. (Charlie)

I experience him and I feel that He empowers me to do things that otherwise I cannot be able to do ... I feel I depend on God to help me through ... I feel he is my rock and foundation. (Chris)

I do feel connected to God but I mean I am sort of ... this idea of me not knowing who I really am ... is depressing to me not knowing what God wants me to do. (Jerome)

My relationship with God, depends on how you see it, but I think is really strong. I really love the Lord with all my heart. (Julie)

I would describe my relationship ... sometimes close. (June)

I think I've got a good relationship with God. It is a personal relationship, even though I belong to a denomination. (Sipho)

I feel quite secure [in my relationship with God]. (Maddie)

The respondents claim they are somehow connected to their DAF. A relationship experience that is sometimes close, good, personal, really strong, connected, secure, good, trusting, or in perfect condition definitely portrays a certain level of proximity with God. The data therefore supports that the respondents used symbolic languages to describe and confirm their connect- edness with God. Hence, however quaint that may seem, it is assumed that the respondents were connected to God, and thus maintain proximity with their DAF based on their responses.

Proximity to God was also experienced in relation to nature in a way that meets the preferred criteria of an attachment bond. Julie believes, for exam- ple, that when she does “things like jogging, racing and so on ... I love God more because that’s when I see God in nature. It is an outlet through which my anxiety is suppressed.” For Cara, her relationship with God is more convincing through outlets of nature. Cara experiences God more when she is in contact with nature. She commented:

Like, I am living in the Strand [a town in South Africa close to a beach] and is like you know there is a beach there and everything there. And actually me and my mother walk on Friday and the winds was so beautiful ... I think God speaks to me through such beautiful scenery as well. Like I don’t know how anyone can see that there is no God, if you see that you must know there is a God—there is a feeling that you experience. Because I love nature, I love to walk and stuff like that so I think God speaks to me through that very powerfully.

Beck and McDonald (2004) had earlier stressed on the power of nature in bringing individuals closer to the divine, and believed that an attachment relationship is also experienced as personal, in relationship and nature.

Conflicted

According to attachment theory, due to the abandonment distress in connection to early caregivers and parent–child difficulties associated with upbringing, insecure individuals tend to grow up either having a disposition of attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety (i.e., attachment insecurity) in social relationships. In some cases, individuals within this category might adopt what Main and Solomon (1986) call a “disorganized attachment style,” meaning a combination of both the attachment avoidant and anxiety.

The respondents for the interviews correspondingly indicated an attachment insecurity, discharged as an anxiety syndrome in their relationship with God. The respondents did not deny a proximity relationship with God as seen previously. However, their early abandonment phenomena, installed in their attachment system during their formative years, had fostered in them an anxiety tendency towards close others, which evidently played out in their bonding experience with God. Although they believed to have some kind of relationship with God, this sort of connectedness often clashed with their inclination to insecurity.

Ultimately, the respondents seemed to be connected to God, evidenced by their use of several symbolic affirmative languages such as “sometimes close,” “good,” “secure,” “personal,” “really strong,” “connected,” “good,” “trusting,” “in perfect condition,” and so on. At the same time, this relationship is in conflict—and somewhat infected—with the errors of the past; or as Janssen et al. (1994, p. 37) put it: “authority of the past.” This sort of confliction with their past has given them an insecure orientation toward future relationships by default. And sadly, this time their relationship with God is not spared either, in this regard.

Although they seemed connected with God, it took a different turn when the researcher probed the respondents to examine the condition of their connections. It was on this note that their internal attachment conditions, in relation to maintaining closeness with God, were explosively discharged in emotion-laden decibels that expressed their attachment conflict with their DAF. From here the study looks carefully at the different attachment conflicts embedded within the respondents’ relationship connection with God.

Connected but worried about abusing his love by putting God aside. Andy is a strong-minded Pentecostal who claims to prize his relationship with God above all things and thinks his relationship with God is in a perfection condition. His priority in life is to cultivate a good relationship with God. According to him, “This is the first thing I put above all things.” Apparently, Andy is aware of his relationship with God, which he finds dignified to share with others. He believes that his relationship with God is of utmost importance because God has demonstrated His love towards him in a tremendous

way, and all he has to do is to respond to that love through his loyalty. This love, he claims, motivates everything he does.

Regardless of Andy's love for God, he worries in his relationship with his DAF, especially when he fails to keep up with the moral requirements of his DAF—an act he fears is an indication of abusing God's love towards him. In this instance, Andy sees God as “an authoritarian Father” (Louw, 2000, p. 7). In Andy's words, “I would worry in my relationship with God when I am so conscious of my love for God, especially when I sin against God. I can sin and just go free because He loves me no matter what.” Andy uses some kind of religious language to regulate the guilt of his “sinful nature,” owing to the fact that his DAF loves him no matter what. This seems to be a biblical reflection drawn from 1 John 4:8 and Psalm 91:14, respectively, speaking about the loving nature of God. Psalm 91:14 in particular, reveals why Andy believes he could be vindicated by such kind of love.

Adam is a committed Christian youth who loves God, although, due to his busy schedule, he thinks he is not doing enough to recompense for the love God had lavished towards him. Hence, as a result, he is worried that his relationship with God is dwindling, an insinuation that God is not happy with him for not getting intimate with Him anymore the way he used to. He sees God in patriarchal terms. Louw (2000) described the patriarchal schema as when God is understood as one acting as a patriarch and therefore dominates his creatures with moral obedience. Hence, negative relationship experience with God are sustained here because of the moral demands of a stern, patriarchal God whose actions are regarded in terms of purification, edification, and retribution. In relation to this experience, Adam admits:

At the current moment with these studies, this work ... it is a bit challenging for me. Because when I work everybody sleeps, when I sleep everybody work. So it is a bit turnaround for my world at the moment. And for my studies ... it is difficult to manage and sacrifice a bit of time to really spend time in intimacy with God and ... most of the time [it] happens on my off days and most times at work to seek intimacy with him because I want to be more like Jesus. That is my desire. At this current moment I realize that, I am not where I should be [in my relationship with God]. I think there is more I can do to delve intimately with God and make time for God. I feel I am not doing enough to give God more time, so I feel God is not happy with me because I am not making out time for Him. ... I use to operate at a certain level of intimacy with God but that time I was not working. There was more time I could spend with God at that time. I feel I need to come to that place again where I seek Him more and do more for Him. Because sometimes it's a bit heavy and tiring—is really challenging for me.

At every point, the respondents use some kind of metaphorical theology as a coping mechanism to either intensify their need for God or regulate their anxiety in their relationship experience with God. Regardless of Adam's busy schedule, he is convinced that he needs to “be more like Jesus,” a classical

teaching among Christians “modelled by Jesus as he grew and developed the disciples into the leaders of his Church” (Grahn, 2011, p. 3).

Sharon, on the other hand, does not deny her relationship with God; rather, she feels she is “putting God aside and always putting other people first.” She feels this has set back her relationship with God, because the things she used to do before and how she felt about God has changed negatively. This has made her worry about her relationship with God, because she felt like she had disappointed Him somehow. She also sees God in patriarchal terms, saying, “I was worried . . . because I felt like I disappointed God. Would I be able to be that person God made me the first time [I came to Him] . . . the one that did everything for God.”

Connected but no personal relationship with God. Sharon also worries because she feels that her relationship with God is not intimate. Because she considers her music ministry in the church as something sacred, she desires a more personal relationship with God. She is encumbered trying to achieve this feat because she feels she gives so much more attention to people than to God. She acknowledged, “For sometimes, I was [trying to] impress other people and always putting other people first. Then I discovered I was going backwards in my relationship with God.” After stressing about her challenge in maintaining proximity to God, she uses a kind of metaphoric theology to reassure herself of her closeness in God, saying: “I know God will somehow carry me through.”

Cara is very insecure in her relationship with God even though God means a lot to her. She admits this by saying, “I feel I am very insecure.” Moreover, her reason for this is clear and simple:

I think you have to like have that personal relationship with Him. Like you know study the Word of God and have a personal relationship with Him to like be able to pray anywhere and anytime. . . . So I think God means so much to me.

Besides, part of the reason why Cara is sort of disoriented about having a relationship with God, according to her, has to do with the problem of evil—why bad things happen to good people. She seems traumatized when she “wonder[s] if He [God] is really there when stuff happen[s].” Cara shared a story of a fellow first-year student who died in a train accident and another who tragically fell from a tree during his student initiation rite and landed on the ground with his head. She marveled,

You know, I sometimes wonder why this is happening. Furthermore, I trust in God with my whole life. God definitely exist you just wonder why bad things happen to such good people. Sometimes this shakes the way I feel about God but I still . . . feel that I [can] trust him.

Regardless of her plight, she also stressed that she has experienced God's goodness in her own life. "Because something bad happened it wasn't necessarily something bad. Because I actually came to the good [understanding] of it," Cara reasons.

Connected but feel I am not strong enough. Charlie apparently loves God and feels good about her relationship with God because of the grace she claims to have experienced amid her confictions. Her fear is that she is not strong enough for God. She is afraid that she might "go back to the world" and forget all about God because of the things that happen in her life. However, she finds comfort using a religious teaching (referenced to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 on worrying about tomorrow) to down-regulate her fears. She comforts herself using a religious teaching drawn from the Bible as she reasons, "You know, sometimes stuff happens and you know, I feel anxious. I think it's human to feel that way and sometimes stuff happens and we worry, but God says in His Word that you must not worry." Charlie was trying to refer to the bible text in Matthew 6:25: "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life." Although Charlie is not open about what she meant by "stuff," she labels her conflicting experience as an "attack of the enemy" in her life, which made her anxious and insecure in her relationship experience with God, thereby acknowledging that she is not strong enough for such an attack of the enemy. Then the question arises as to whom the enemy is. Apparently, Christians often use religious languages to associate extreme conditions of life as a crafted handwork of the devil. It is not surprising that Charlie may be referring to the devil. Clearly, she expresses two logical religious languages as a response to her God attachment anxiety.

Wendy is in her early thirties and separated from her husband against her own will. Although she says he domestically abused her, she hopes that someday God will reunite them again. She seems concerned that God may not honor this request since her best friend lured her husband away from his marital home. A part of her repels her husband for leaving his kids. In addition, although she wishes to have a peaceful home for her children, she is hesitant about accepting her husband back because of the history of domestic abuse she suffered when they were together. Moreover she is troubled in her relationship with God. However, after getting words from her pastor and members in the church to trust God to have her "abuser" back into her life, a bargain she is worried might truly be the intention of God for her, she is now worried about the take of God on the matter. Wendy feels she is not strong enough to experience such trauma again even though it might be the will of God. This decision-making trauma causes her setbacks and distress in her relationship experience with her DAF, which in her opinion is

discomforting, and thus a challenge in assuming a proximate position with her DAF. Wendy explained:

I have been through a lot of stuff, abuse both mentally and physically and with my kids also they have been through a lot. Every time I ask God why why why? Like this morning ... another girl in our group in church told me to trust God that I will get my husband back. My pastor told me to put my ring back ... every time I take my husband back he comes and abuses me even in front of my kids ... and am asking God what must I do. That's my biggest challenge because everyone in church is like God says this in the bible ... everyone is pushing me and that's my biggest worry. What am I going to do?

Regardless of her attachment anxiety, Wendy comforts herself using a metaphorical theology in form of a God concept saying, "He [God] is like my pillar of strength," a biblical metaphor often used to describe the God of the bible as the source of strength. Wendy down regulates her fears using an assuring religious metaphor that represents her DAF as the fundamental force behind her strength and therefore would handle any challenge that comes her way. This apparently might also mean accepting the spoken will of her DAF, which she feels is the "voice of the people." While others seem to portray religious attachment behaviors through praying, religious participation, and etc., Wendy seems to be experiencing God differently as she sees the relationship with her DAF through the lens of human relationship.

Connected but worried for not getting what I hope God would give me. A self-reliant, do-it-my-own-way kind of youth, June believes in herself and feels confident about fixing her needs on her own if not attended to by her DAF. June's position in her relationship with God falls under the emotional compensation attachment model (cf. Counted, 2016a), which was her response to her early abandonment crisis. After her attachment separation from her mother who left her for London at Grade 1, she had grown up to become more self-reliant, anxious, and avoidant in her social relationships, especially with her DAF. She now has what Main and Solomon (1986) call "disorganized attachment style." Her insecurity in her relationship with God comes when she asks God for something and it is not done. When she does not get an immediate answer to her request from her DAF, she drowns in distress and as a result avoids her DAF; thus, tending to deal with her cravings all by herself. She concurred:

In my life I have few disappointments. Sometimes I don't easily understand the stuffs that has happened and why it is happening. I have learned at least that it doesn't get better so when I don't get answers I tend to step back and try to do it myself.

Sipho is a committed Roman Catholic. He has no doubt about his relationship with God but finds it hard to maintain the bond with God, especially when it is:

A matter of expectations . . . getting to a situation where you would expect that this and that would happen. You set plans at times and they are not materialized. Like . . . how can this be? What kind of a God are you? I have done this and this and this.

This, according to Sipho, gets to the grain of his soul, making him to burst in anger during prayers. “At times my prayers are not normally formal prayers. I get very personal . . . I talk to him. Sometimes I feel like shouting . . . like this cannot work. What kind of God are you?” Although it is sometimes difficult to understand the workings of his DAF, he has developed a logical defense mechanism in response to his God attachment anxiety. He says, “I have come to a defense mechanism whereby I have decided to find meaning in everything. Whether it is positive or it is negative.”

A major concern for Sipho, however, was his childhood dream of becoming a priest, which, according to him, may not be possible anymore. Sipho narrated his story:

I have always wanted to be a priest . . . in fact I should be a priest by now considering when I went to the monastery. When I started in 2004, my superiors wanted me to do education and not to pursue philosophy and knowledge. And I fought against it because I wanted to be a priest. After I had made my final vows the question of education came up again, and I was told now you are going to do it. I had an option to say no I am not going to do that I am going to go home or say I am not leaving the monastery but I am also not going to do education I will rather sit here. I was advised to do education maybe that’s what God wants you to do, maybe that’s your vocation . . . if I have fought this idea for 10 years and it comes up under the 11th year . . . maybe God is trying to tell me something. I have cried about this. I have talked to God about this. I have even swore to people about this. At a certain stage I came to a point I was like . . . find meaning in this situation. May be that’s where I will be good. May be that’s where He [God] wants my services. After that, I came to a point where I adopted two principles: “What will Jesus Do? What does he want me to do?”

Sipho acknowledged that it might not be the will of God for him to be an ordained priest, and as a result, he has decided to find meaning in his situation—a supposed religious accent inspired by two questions (i.e., “What will Jesus Do?” and “What does he want me to do?”). Embedded in them are religious reflections of some sort that are therapeutic to his God attachment anxiety.

Wendy is worried about her relationship with God, who seems to be happy in seeing her suffer. She wants ease from the challenges of life. “A lot of times I am worried about stuff . . . is like I have this huge problem. When that is finished, then there is another one, then another. So I asked

God, why is this stuff happening?” Regardless of her situation, she is committed to dealing with her issues since she believes her DAF is her “source of strength.”

A compassionate Christian youth, Cara believes that her DAF does truly exist. Although she trusts her DAF, she is infuriated as to “why bad things happen to such good people,” which often endangers the way she feels about her DAF and, to a greater extent, her trust in her DAF. She is not happy with her DAF for allowing her to experience events that sadden her, and therefore missing what she bargained for in her attachment relationship with God. She uses some form of religious accent to cope with and regulate this traumatizing experience. This enables her to see what God’s plan for her is from those ordeals. In Cara’s cognitive understanding of God she now believes that He has a good plan for her, which seems like a biblical reflection drawn from Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plan I have for you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Connected but unclear about my purpose. Living a purpose-driven life seems to be another challenge for the respondents. A majority of them are not sure about their purpose, in relation to what their DAF expects of them.

Jerome, for example, feels connected to God in some way but is confused about what God wants from him. Julie wishes that God would come to lead her way since she is future blinded. The emotionally inclined Pentecostal Yebo believes that his college program is not rightly positioning him to please God. He is a system analysis student but often thinks he would please God more if he was studying theology. Yebo claims his heart is in the kingdom of God and wants to deliver his best to Him.

June, on the other hand, is troubled because of her future and worries that she will not be able to support her family after her study. The attachment separation experienced by June during her childhood seems to play a major role in this confusion. Her mother left her for London when she was just in first grade, because she needed to support her family financially. The same condition that led her early AF to abandon her is now a “thorn in the flesh,” as she grows up worrying about the same exact thing her early caregiver was concerned about, which led to their separation.

The following words show the respondents’ uncertainty about their future in relation to their relationship experience with their DAF:

I am not sure what God has or what my plan is in God’s eyes like what I’m I going to do or what am I on this earth to do because I mean we all have this general sort of plan to proclaim the word of God and spread the gospel but I feel like there could possibly be a little more for me but am not sure what that is. Because I am not sure, what my purpose is I get a little worried about my relationship with God. I do feel connected to God but I mean am sort of . . . this idea of me not knowing who I really am . . . is depressing to me not knowing what God wants me to do.
(Jerome)

I want to know that my happiness is solely dependent on what is strong [referring to her DAF] and always there and what is fundamental and the Lord must come and lay the basis. I am stress of what God expects of me because of a misinterpretation of that due to circumstances I've been through growing up. (Julie)

My concerns are very much with the fact that this is my last year in college and I've come to the point where I am actually discovering myself. Actually ... I came to the realization that this IT that I am studying that I don't have a passion for it. I don't even love what I am studying for ... I am worried because I have found that whenever you don't have the love for something it affects how you respond on that something. It all traces back to where I want to do everything to glorify God. I want to deliver to God ... my best. My heart is in the kingdom of God. (Yebo)

I am not there where I wanted to be—I know it is important in one's life ... I think money plays a vital role. I am worried that I will get in a stage where I can't one day provide for my family—I worry about that. I don't worry about having a big house—I am worried about providing for my family one day. (June)

The respondents present their cases using some form of religious language to either support their concerns or comfort their emotional bubbles. Jerome, for example, although worried about God's plan for his future, uses the religious metaphor "voice of God," which for him might actually be a channel through which his invisible DAF speaks to him:

I listen to what others are saying because I am looking for sort of a sense of direction ... the thing is that God speaks from a lot of people and I am listening to try and find who these people are—may be they are the voice of God.

June's use of a religious concept about a God that uses imperfect people to do great things serves as a coping mechanism for her God attachment anxiety. She had learned to strengthen and reassure herself of a bright future from the biblical story of Rehab, the prostitute in Joshua 2; a religious chronicle she learned in a Sunday school class. She had this to say:

There was one year that was the year I decided to care not about what people said about [me] because of what they taught me in Sunday school. They taught me that ... God uses imperfect people for His kingdom ... He doesn't use perfect people. And ... I remember well is about the prostitute Rehab who led the spies in ... if you go along history, she was the great grand mother of Jesus. That means so much to me ... to show that God uses a woman with no status ... I think at that time she was nothing.

Connected but difficult to stay hooked to God all the time. Staying connected in a relationship with God was one thing, but steadfastness and being faithful in such relationship is challenging for most of the respondents. The following verbal confessions evidently portray such discomfort:

Some days I feel like really distant ... like I feel like am here and he is there—we don't feel like a package. I'm worried like is difficult for me to feel connected with him all the time. Like I believe in God and I know I have a relationship with him.

... But sometimes I just feel he is so far away from me—like how could I so small have a relationship with something so big [and] out of my reach. (Maddie)

You know I am not that so prayerful personally. But then I take it that ... whatever small time I get if I can say what's on my mind then I think I leave everything to God ... not how long I can say something. But sometimes a day might go by without me saying prayers ... I ask myself, "Am I so close?" (Marvin)

I started to realize that seriously I am putting God aside and always putting other people first. I worry because the things I used to do and how I felt about God everything changed. ... I was worried because ... I felt like I disappointed God. (Sharon)

There are certain times when I am on fire for the messiah, when am full of faith, and there are times when am just lukewarm based on something that came up. Maybe like ... yesterday and all the time I have been fighting against giving in. ... When I reach the stage where I want to go forward, it [he was referring to pornography] always stands up and the thought of that being there it overwhelms me. If that thing come again ... I watch the porn. But sometimes I really really really try hard just to withstand it. I feel guilty, feel like a failure ... that feeling you have when you wrong someone that means so much to you. (Yebo)

God as a response to separation and loss

Again, what was interesting to me was to see how the respondents expressed their God attachment language using God concepts as defense mechanisms to cope with their emotional tensions, and reinforce their images of self over time in relation to their God attachment experience. Concepts of God and religious language were means through which the respondents expressed their God attachment language patterns, and a means by which they continue to regulate and reinforce themselves in the place of fear, abandonment, and emotional conflict in their supposed attachment experience with God (Dykstra, 1986, p. 170). Of note, respondents seem to relate with their DAF as a response to their early attachment separation or loss. In the place of separation or loss, they compensated for their abandonment and fear with a relationship experience with a DAF.

After emotionally losing his father and mother as a teenager due to divorce, Neville's anxiety with God is the very reason he is not afraid of death, but rather signals that he is afraid of life (Moltmann, 1997). According to him, there was no role model in his life, "There was no person around me to prevent and uplift me. I found myself ... in the drugs." His separation experience with his parents got him into drugs and gangsterism, a negative coping style he adopted to deal with his attachment separation with his parents. After almost losing his life to gangsterism, following an incident where he was stabbed more than five times, he found himself in the hospital for days. This particular incident changed his life for good. At that point he realized the greater need to turn away from gangsterism, which he had thought would satiate his attachment separation with his parents. This

experience led him to turn to a DAF in response to his separation experience. Following the gangster attack that left him hospitalized, Neville had an experience with a DAF that changed his life. According to Neville, he was not supposed to be alive. He now sees God as “life” because in his own words, “I am still here. I know He is a creator.” Neville believes that his DAF saved his life when he was stabbed and he now unequivocally stands as his attachment role model. This was a miracle performed by his DAF, he claims. According to Neville, this event contributed to his devotion to his faith in a bid to somehow interact more with God, his DAF, as a response to the emotional separation from his parents. In Neville’s words, “I realized there is God. If you fall on your knees and ask God to change your life . . . as it was in the beginning why can’t it be now?”

Sharon now sees God as both “caring and love,” after a supposed strange separation episode with her mother. She then found love in her DAF, which seems like a compensatory response to her emotional loss with her mother. According to her,

These days I can experience God in my life . . . in supernatural ways I experience God and he shows me his love and his caring towards me. I don’t know but sometimes it amazes me and it knots me out of my feet. I know it is not by might nor by power but by the spirit.

Again, Sharon used a religious vocabulary, “it is not by power nor by might but by the Spirit of the Lord,” drawn from Zachariah 4:6 to relight her relationship experience with her DAF. Thereby serving as a response to her separation crisis with her mother, which for her is now refurnished with a loving relationship to her DAF; a supposed relationship founded on grace and not by her merit.

After her father left his marital home for his wife’s cousin, Wendy fell into an abandonment depression and now finds it difficult to trust anybody, even within her church. However, somehow she drew closer to God, her DAF, through the agency of the local church and can now relate to God as a “father figure.” This was a response to her father’s separation, but now she feels light and strengthened in her relationship experience with God. She relates to her DAF in many ways. She explained:

My church is drawing me closer to God. I can talk to God like God is right here . . . I can feel His warmth inside of me. I can do anything . . . I can praise him as I like . . . I can pray anytime to him. I can sing to God and I will feel God.

God as a secure base and a safe haven

The respondents rarely fail to use some kind of religious language or God concepts to describe their attachment relationship with God. Next are examples of linguistic conventions used by the respondents to describe God as

either some kind of safe haven or as a secure base to whom they can run to in times of distress. This God attachment language allows the respondents to test their actual traumatizing emotional experiences with God over what is most essential to it. More so, the metaphorical theology used by the respondents are agencies through which they relate to and communicate with God, thereby rekindling and reinforcing themselves of God's power over their internal conflict. "God as a secure base and safe haven" is here discussed in the order of the God concepts used by the respondents to describe this God attachment language criteria.

Louw described "God concepts" as an aspect of "metaphorical theology," which is a conscious attempt to "take the meaning-dimension of God-languages and contexts seriously" (2000, p. 49). Metaphorical theology understands the process of naming God in human existential issues. It is from here that Louw guides us in his discussion of metaphorical theology in relation to God concepts. He opens up on four God concepts from the bible that depict God in our God attachment anxiety and crisis. These God concepts convey the "meaning of compassion, help, and consolation in terms of God's involvement" in our human experiences, namely: *shepherd*, *servant*, *wisdom*, and *paraclete* (Louw, 2000, p. 50). The Hebrew origin for the word shepherd came from the word to "rule over the earth" (Gn. 1:26), even though not in terms of exploitation. Shepherding is a more subtle form of rulership that implies "sensitive and compassionate caring" (Louw, 2000, p. 50). This was man's mandate over the earth, to care and shepherd it. This instruction also corresponds to God's likeness as he cares and shepherds his own creation. Psalm 23 speaks of this: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Revealing God as a shepherd in our relationship experience with Him feeds the void of protection, provision, and direction in terms of God's faithfulness and grace. It is within this context of God concept that the people of the Old Testament experienced a secure attachment relationship "within God's shepherding care" (Louw, 2000, p. 50). The wounded healer is another God concept used to relate to God as a servant within the extensions of our emotional placements with God. It reveals God's identification with our experience in a very unique way. Christ brings to fore this concept in his "vicarious suffering" on the cross (Louw, 2000, p. 52), as he takes the place of suffering for others as a "Servant of God's redeeming work" (p. 52) in relation to our early abandonment betrayal, sin, loss, and illness. The implication of the *servant* concept in our relationship with God is that it "convey [s] the idea of sacrifice and identification with suffering human beings in need" (p. 52). A servant God concept vocabulary in relation to our attachment experiences shows how identifying and communicating with Christ's "vicarious suffering" leads to healing and recovering. The wisdom model is an insightful way of addressing the God attachment experience by looking at the experience from an unusual, new God concept. Perhaps we have been

seeing the attachment experience with God from a wrong angle, and as a result we are unable to deal with the crisis effectively. By allowing ourselves to see our experiences in a radically different way using God concepts that speak to our experience, “we discern, through this very seeing, how it may be resolved or that it is not a problem after all” (Capps, 1990, p. 169). The word *paraclete* is often used for the Hebrew *naham*, which means “sympathy” and “comfort.” In other words, emphasis is made here to use concepts of God that express sympathy, compassion, and caring (Louw, 2000, p. 56). A common example is that of Psalm 135:14. A *paraclete* concept of God is often used to encourage, strengthen, and guide the self towards healing and finding meaning in its experiences (Braumann, 1978).

I will briefly discuss how the respondents saw God in light of these themes/concepts as a secure base and safe haven in relation to their God attachment language.

God, the provider

Theologians generally believe that God revealed Himself as Jehovah Jireh (i.e., God will provide) in relation to the biblical Abraham. This was referenced to when Abraham was praying in expectation for God’s provision of a lamb for his sacrifice. Theologian Clayton Coombs (2013) wrote that after God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, he was convinced about shedding the blood of his only son. It was at the very last minute when Abraham had already bound Isaac to the altar that, according to bible historians, God stopped Abraham and provided him with a lamb instead. It was within this context that Abraham called the place “The LORD will provide” or in the Hebrew rendering, “Jehovah Jireh.”

The theme of God as a provider comes strongly in the respondents’ narratives as they speak about their limitless hope in God who seems to be their provider in times of need, a lens from which they see God as a secure base and some sort of safe haven. The response from Julie supports this claim:

I have to trust him and I have to see who He is and believe him. He says that he guards my heart and he loves me enough and he would provide. God is good. God is what you anticipate . . . God is whatever you need him to be. He says that he is whatever you feel at that stage . . . whatever you go through . . . he adapts to be whatever is sufficient for you. I had an opportunity at my department to do my masters for next year and I asked the Lord about it whether I should do it. And I got peace with the fact that God has really provided but then the thing is I knew this thing about horse riding that I really wanted to do so I ask him . . . it is ok, it is fine I have to do the masters but when am I really going to do this other things that I want to do and just like when I look up I saw this banner for a horse riding club like right in front of me. And I have been walking pass that same side lots of times and I never saw it. And I just knew that’s it. He opens your eyes in many ways. He is sufficient for you.

God's goodness and faithfulness in times of desperation seems to be another way to emphasize her safety in the presence of God who acts as her Provider. Julie has seen her DAF acting as her provider in many ways, an action which ultimately models her DAF as a safe haven and secure base.

God, the rewarder

In spite of Jerome's abandonment affliction caused by his father's alcohol problem, he has decided to explore his DAF from the lens of safety and as a sort of safe haven. He sees his DAF as someone who rewards and requites those that truly have a loving relationship with Him. Jerome explained:

God rewards, and He is very rewarding and loving. He has actually acted as a Rewarder for me. For example, with my dad—so it was like close to the end of Grade 11 and my results were to be sent to Stellenbosch University for provisional acceptance and at that time my dad was like having an alcohol problem. So that was big on me . . . because both of my brothers weren't there and lot of times I didn't know what to do—I did get home and then I would always ask my dad for help and you know he was not that father figure because I did get home and my dad will be drunk and sleepy and when he wakes up he doesn't say much—he just carries on drinking and sleeping. . . . And through my prayer I didn't know where to turn to and I prayed a lot and thanks to God I am actually where I am today. He is a rewarder.

God, the true friend

Most of the respondents saw their experience of security with the divine within the context of friendship. This appears to be a biblical concept of God seen as a true friend (cf. John 15:15; John 15:13–14; James 2: 23; Proverbs 18:24). According to Siphon, Marvin, and Yebo, God is exactly that. For them, God is someone closer to them than their human AFs. Furthermore, he is a friend who can also play the role of an avenger on their behalf, and sometimes helps them “pass [life- and academic-] exams.” For Yebo, God being a true friend is an act of faithfulness. Indeed, the greatest evidence of true friendship is faithfulness or loyalty, says Mills (2014, p. 11). However, what does it mean in reality to be a faithful friend? A faithful friend is someone who will stick with someone through thick and thin, regardless of the outcome. In light of their experience with God as true friend, the respondents illustrated:

God is somebody I can bond with . . . somebody very near than a father. A friend. Again i've got an incident whereby I felt God answered almost immediate. I was in a situation where I was fighting with somebody that had power over me and couldn't do anything. And actually through the danger of my life he said things to me that I didn't even answer a word. I actually cried. You know the following morning that guy could not talk . . . his voice couldn't come out and he had a hand that was swollen and his veins were block. He was taken to all different kind of doctors. He was told there was nothing wrong with you. If it continues we will

have to amputate you. For me that was a sign . . . you know God protects his own. I was powerless at a time. He is someone closer that I can always fall back to. (Sipho)

I will say God is a true friend. I will bring it in a sense that you know most times we take friends as people we come to in times of need and all that. By true friend I mean someone who is there the time that you need them most. The most important bit of it is each time I'm like heading to may be do something that determines an important step in my life . . . mostly in my education. The major exams that transfer me to different levels . . . I find myself tending to be more prayerful at that time. And what happens is that I normally succeed. (Marvin)

There are times in my life, based on how I wanted to do stuff. At that time I say I felt something telling me to just tell the truth. And the bible says that "He is always with us." And on that word, I responded and actually I was thinking that people would be mad at me in this situation but in actual fact they just said it's alright. God is faithful. And I was like "wow"—so that is just a proof of God being in a situation. (Yebo)

True friendship in light of these narratives became a precursor through which the respondents experienced their DAF as both a safe haven and secure base.

God, the father of love

Conceptually, metaphorical theology teaches us the different ways in which individuals verbally represent their existential experiences of God using religious metaphors and vocabularies (Counted, 2015b). This representation process can be complicated and emotional to say the least. One such metaphorical theology (Louw, 2000) in the form of a God concept (Counted, 2015b) can be that of shepherdhood, where God is represented as a compassionate and sensitive carer (Louw, 2000). However, this basic logic corresponds to God's likeness as one who cares and shepherds his own creation. The concept of shepherdhood reveals God as someone who is faithful to guide, love, care, and be a fortress, as well as being a source of help in times of trouble. Theologically, God is represented in the bible as the Father who has lavished so much love to the world (Bonhoeffer, 1967; Moltmann, 1974, 1981).

In light of this understanding, the respondents portrayed God (their DAF) as compassionate and empathic to their experiences, an attribute of love of which they find commensurate to being a safe haven and secure base. The respondents opened up on their DAF, as the Father of love:

My parents . . . love me really much and due to the circumstances they grew up they can't help it but to be critics. . . . You see they have these academic expectations of you and that you have to work hard. The other thing is the course I am studying is really challenging . . . but the Lord came and changed all that when I gave Him the time to actually do that. I didn't realize it when I was growing up I only realized it when I actually started building my relationship with the Lord and seeking His truth and what he actually expects of me. (Julie)

I know He is a Creator. He is life because I am here still. If not because of Him, I won't be here. He gave me a second chance by turning my life in a better way—I

am blessed and I've been blessed. I was stabbed five times, then I realized there is God [I'm evidence of His love]. (Neville)

God to me is caring and He's love. These days I can experience God in my life . . . in supernatural ways I experience God, He shows me His love, and He is caring towards me. I don't know but sometimes it amazes me and it knocks me out of my feet. (Sharon)

I feel I depend on God to help me through the situation. I feel He is my rock and foundation. (Chris)

Regardless of the lens through which the respondents experience their DAFs, the cases support the God attachment language criterion of safety and security--albeit described using corresponding God concepts.

God perceived as stronger and wiser

Drawing from the different God concepts cited previously to describe the attachment language criteria of an affective bond between the respondents and God, I continued to track the use of God concepts and religious language by the respondents to either describe or inhibit their emotional crisis in their relationship experience with God. Representing God as stronger and wiser clearly illustrates the wisdom model, and partly the paraclete model.

In the words of Louw (2000, p. 55), wisdom "embraces practical skills and is linked to human creativity," focusing on questions "about the art of life (how must I live?), morality (how should I act and deal with my neighbor?), as well as piety (how should I act in the presence of God?)" (2000, p. 55). The importance of the wisdom model lies in the fact that it helps one to imagine how God views the challenges associated with an attachment relationship experience, and therefore considers it from God's perspective. This allows them to use God concepts reminding them of God's active involvement in their experience. The wisdom model is often humbling and paradoxical in nature because it brings personal anxiety and "stupidity" to light while at the same time helping to overcome perceived folly and emotional weakness (Capps, 1990; Louw, 2008).

The following are subliminal experiences and responses that commonly fall under the attachment language category developed by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008), recognizing God as stronger or wiser. Here, I engaged the respondents to see how they perceived God as stronger and wiser from the wisdom and paraclete models.

All-knowing and powerful love of God

June admits that her life is not what she had hoped it would be, and that as a result she is uncomfortable in her attachment relationship experience with God because of future expectations of having to support her family. Regardless of her emotional turmoil, she somehow perceives God to be

wiser than her comprehension. Drawing from her Sunday school lesson on the biblical figure Rehab the prostitute, she is ever more convinced that what God says about her future is wiser and thereby reassures her of a better end. About the biblical story of Rehab, June says, “[It] means so much to me . . . to show that God uses a woman with no status.”

June is also conflicted about losing her sister to a car accident, an incident that happened on a Sunday morning on their way to church. This has also contributed to her anxiety. Notwithstanding, she defends God’s goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil:

I see Him as a higher power. Someone who needs to be respected. God is a President and a Power to respect. For example, when he takes people by accidents and diseases but again he is loving. And he is mighty when there is hurricane and storms and hunger but he is also good when He sends rain for the drought. My sister has died. And also my grandparents have died. We were on a big accident as well and I was involved in the accident. The lady who was involved got very hurt and her whole personality changed. She was in a coma for about two years and half. It made me question “Why she?” Because the accident happened on our way to church . . . it is quite interesting.

June has a profound understanding of her DAF. Irrespective of her emotional conflict, she somehow manages to see the light at the end of the tunnel, as she conceptually imagines her DAF as an omniscient, wise, and strong figure who, regardless of how she herself feels about her present condition, has a much brighter and stronger agenda for her.

Julie, on the other hand, sees herself from the all-judicious eyes of God irrespective of what the world expects of her. She believes that God is wiser in all regards and therefore she tries to see herself in light of God’s perception of her: “I try to see myself in the light that God sees me and I am actually loving myself. He sees me as his daughter, as precious, as worthy and valuable whereas I didn’t see that before.”

Since God is all-knowing and manifests himself through Yebo in multiple ways, Yebo is contented with himself because so is God. “I am pleased with myself because God is pleased with me,” he says. This is a reflection of someone who has submitted to the powerful loving arms of God. Although Yebo admits that he sometimes feels guilt and fear due to his inability to keep up with the moral demands of his DAF, he is nevertheless encouraged to do so because he is sure that God is pleased with him and will not despise him as he understands his weakness. In this sense, God’s love is powerful and beyond human comprehension, even in the midst of a moral depravity. Powerful not in the sense of knocking down, but powerfully loving, regardless of a moral disorder, because God is an all-knowing high priest. In this case, a high priest in the person of Jesus who, like Yebo, has been conflicted. He was conflicted while on the cross, voicing his own emotional tension with God the Father saying, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*” which means, “My God,

My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” It is clear that Jesus himself was struggling with his attachment experience to God the Father, whom He saw at that point as his DAF. The four words that speak of Jesus’ God attachment vulnerability points toward his emotional crisis on the cross. But at the same time, as Christ becomes aware of God’s presence and identification with his affliction on the cross, as well as the nature of his relationship with God the Father, he submits to the will of God the Father as he surrenders himself to God’s covenantal promise of resurrection, thereby seeing God the Father as all stronger and wiser. On this ground, “God” is then powerful in his loving and suffering (Moltmann, 1981).

God, the pillar of strength

First, Sharon starts by saying, “I know God will carry me through . . . it is not by might nor by power but by the spirit.” She uses a God concept to inhibit her traumatic attachment experience. She gave this response after narrating her abandonment experience. Growing up as an “unwanted child” was difficult for her. In spite of her abusive upbringing, she tries to relate with God, who intervenes for her and has made her a stronger person. Sharon sees God as a pillar of strength in her life, someone much stronger and who has stood for her and helps her through her issues.

Point blank, Wendy says, “He is like my pillar of strength.” She continues, “I can face now any battle because I know I have God.” She narrated why she perceives God as stronger in her life:

I went to court last week and I asked God to give me strength because I was like a weakling. Because every time I face my husband in court I will get in tears and I will be scared. But last time before I went to court, I started to pray and I was feeling anxiety and I always ask God to please guide me. That the words that would go out let it be only His words. And that morning when I stood up I asked God to guide me through this thing . . . I have to face this and I can’t postpone it all the time. In my bag I have my bible . . . I anointed myself with oil before I went in. And I was standing there and he was coming with his girlfriend there . . . and I greeted them . . . I never greeted them. . . . I was sitting there beside him in the court . . . and I was facing him and the judge said, “Wow . . . the last time you couldn’t get the word out of your mouth.” After the court . . . he said, “I don’t understand you.” So . . . for months I could stand by him and talk to him and just be myself.

So far, I have tried to portray how the respondents’ God-attachment experiences fall under the attachment language criteria of Granqvist and Kirkpatrick. Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008) argued that the defining criteria for an attachment relationship should be characterized by maintaining closeness/proximity with an AF, seeing the AF as a safe haven and secure base, as well as a response to separation and loss, and as stronger and wiser.

Clearly, early-child relationship with caregivers potentiates attachment interactions and gene survival in the attachment system. This system lays

the foundation for IWMs of the self and close others in attachment relationships. This development makes individuals to expect some kind of “felt-security” in close relationships, especially in long-term romantic and God attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1973). The research data collected support that the respondents’ God-attachment experiences correspond to the four main attachment language criteria of Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008), and therefore represent God as a DAF.

Conclusion

This study carefully examined the respondents’ God attachment experiences and use of religious language, as well as God concepts in light of the attachment language criteria of Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008). The respondents’ narratives of their God experience showed that their relationship to God, through their attachment language, corresponds to the God attachment language criteria of an enduring and strong affectionate bond.

Respondents were therefore asked to describe God using adjectives and then relate an experience they had which captured these ways of understanding God (Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2003). Whilst narrating their God attachment experience in light of their prescribed adjectives, respondents were able to provide an understanding that Bruner (1983) called “relational dynamics,” which is an interpretation bordered by “the history of an interaction dynamics of a given relation” (Cobb, 2013, p. 57). The adjectives decoded into words were either broad or religious metaphors such as provider, rewarder, true friend, loving, and counselor, which I judged as less helpful in understanding the God attachment language of the respondents. However, the story embedded within each of the verbalized adjectives gave a much clearer clue to their God attachment language cues. I then drew from Corbin and Strauss’ (2008) deductive content analysis to explain the relational patterns consistent and operational with the attachment language criteria given by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008).

The respondents did not deny their relationship with God; however, they were somewhat concerned about maintaining a relationship with an AF that can neither be seen nor touched. Maintaining a relationship with an unseen AF seemed unrealistic to some of them. As a result, they took on a posture of attachment anxiety in their relationship experience with God, which seemed to cause them to be either lukewarm or less committed to the moral demands of their DAF. They saw God being very far away from them, and as a consequence, related more to human attachment figures instead of their DAF.

Overall the respondents portrayed, in one form or the other, the first God attachment language criterion: God as a target for their proximity seeking. This did not, however, make their relationship experience with God perfect as they,

even in such sense of closeness, had some kind of tension or case against God. Such emotional anxiety in their relationship experience with God often erupted into negative God attachment experiences, which were generally inhibited and down regulated by using some kind of metaphorical theology in the form of God concepts or religious language. Their God attachment experiences were either reinforced or strengthened as they continued to experience God in other attachment language patterns, either as stronger or wiser, as a response to their separation and loss, or as a secure base and safe haven.

The study shows that the anxiously attached respondents have emotional conflict and tension in their accounts of relationship experience with God with regards to their time with God, life's purpose, prayer life, God abandonment, childhood experiences, theodicy, and keeping up with the moral demands of God. These are indicators of attachment insecurity with God. Such salient relationship experience is operationalized on the basis of their application of metaphorical theology demonstrated through their use of God concepts and religious language, which frames their cognitive understanding of the divine and at the same time regulates their emotional conflict with the divine. At many scenarios, the respondents navigate into emotional-laden explosions of anxiety in their relationship with God based on their previous negative attachment experiences with a caregiver or a parent. Consequently, the respondents nevertheless showed gratitude towards God for playing a role in their life as an AF.

The respondents' narratives, so far, are consistent with Granqvist and Kirkpatrick's (2008) theoretical definition of an attachment relationship. The experiences of the Christian youths in this study are therefore in consonance with the theoretical characterizations of an enduring and strong affectionate bond.

Against this background, I will conclude by saying that the emotional conflict of the Christian youths in this study, resulting from their attachment abuse, experience of attachment separation or loss, and human interactions, made maintaining proximity with God a fundamental task for these youths in the place of fear and emotional insecurity.

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Notes

1. The respondents participated in a self-report survey conducted by the same researcher that uses the Attachment to God Inventory instrument to measure the God attachment orientations of 100 Christian youths from Stellenbosch, South Africa.
2. Elsewhere (see Counted, 2016a), I have provided empirical evidence that supports the individual-difference pathways of the God-attachment experience.

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