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# EXPLORING CHRISTIANS' EXPLICIT ATTACHMENT TO GOD REPRESENTATIONS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TEMPLATE FOR ASSESSING ATTACHMENT TO GOD EXPERIENCES

MARIE-THERESE PROCTOR<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>;  
MAUREEN MINER<sup>1,4,5</sup>;  
LOYOLA MCLEAN<sup>6</sup>;  
STUART DEVENISH<sup>1,7</sup>;  
BAGHER GHOBARY BONAB<sup>8</sup>

1. Australasian Centre for Studies in Spirituality

2. The Children's Hospital at Westmead

3. Central Queensland University

4. Australian College of Ministries

5. University of Western Sydney

6. University of Sydney

7. Booth College: Salvation Army

8. University of Tehran

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Assessment of attachment to God (ATG) has generally focused on tapping the construct via self-report measures. Little, if any attention has been paid to assessing ATG via independent ratings of Christians' relationship with God narratives, obtained at interview. The current study addressed this deficit. It documents the development of a template for assessing Christians' relationship with God narratives for specific ATG experiences. Three theoretically-derived ATG profiles, labeled as secure-autonomous, insecure-anxious/preoccupied and insecure-dismissing ATG were operationally defined as a series of relational markers. Thirty-one Christians participated in a God Attachment Interview Schedule (GAIS), a semi-structured interview which taps Christians' past and present relationship with God experiences. Participants' narratives were analyzed using the template, this revealing relational evidence supportive of the hypothesized relational markers. Validation of the template is an important milestone in the development of a scoring protocol to assign an overall ATG profile based on the narrated experiences of Christians.

Being in relationship with God is at the heart of the Christian experience (Stark & Glock, 1968). Scripture attests that God is essentially a personal God who desires to relate to His people (Psalm, 27; Isaiah, 49: 15, 64: 8). In turn God's people are called to love the Lord God and to love their neighbor as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39). Even Creation itself is portrayed as a relational act, with White (1984) noting *imago Dei* is essentially "a relational concept, which calls human beings to exist in a special relationship with God" (White, 1984, p.286). White further suggests that the aspect of the *imago Dei* that survived The Fall was 'humankind's need and desire for relationships', and that relationship with God was "not something to be possessed but a relationship in which to exist" (White, 1984, p.286, 287).

However within the domain of psychology, the centrality of the human-divine relationship to the Christian experience has not always been well acknowledged. For example, Moberg (1967) was critical when "the man-God relationship" which he deemed to be "at the core of Christian spirituality" was omitted when the core dimensions of religiosity

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Please address correspondence to Marie-Therese, PhD, 16 Hill Street, Picton, 2571, NSW, Australia. Email: m-tproctor@bigpond.com.

(experiential, ritualistic, ideological, intellectual, and consequential were nominated (Glock & Stark, 1965; Moberg, 1967a, p.12; Moberg, 1967b). The omission of a relational dimension was disappointing; it was as though the central Christian experience of a deeply personal connection between an individual Christian and God was sidelined.

More recently, psychology of religion researchers have sought to remedy this oversight, appropriating a range of mainstream psychological theories in the hope of gaining a deeper and richer understanding of Christians' relationship with God (e.g., object relations theory (Brokaw & Edwards, 1994; Hall & Edwards, 1996a, 1996b); affective theory (Hill, 1995). One theory attracting significant interest as a lens through to view human experiences of, and relationship with the divine, has been attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988).

### *An Attachment Perspective on Christians' Relationships with God*

Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980) has been used as conceptual framework for exploring and explicating the nature, function and quality of Christians' relationships with God. For example, researchers are increasingly exploring the link between psycho-spiritual variables such as attachment to God (ATG) and a range of psychological, health and well-being variables (Proctor, Miner, & Dowson, in review; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Sim & Loh, 2003) and their clinical salience and utility (Proctor, 2009; Proctor & McLean, 2009).

The appeal of attachment theory is several-fold. The theory addresses the:

- i. Role and function of core relational dynamics (the affective, behavioural and cognitive components of a relationship) as they relate to the provision of protection and comfort by significant other(s) in times of threat;
- ii. Role and contribution of both the one providing protection (the significant other) as well as the one being protected (the self); and
- iii. Relational space that forms between the dyadic partners (the attachment bond).

In the context of the Christian experience, Biblical stories repeatedly speak of the ways in which God protected His chosen people (the Exodus event as the prototypical example – Exodus Chapters 3-15) and of the Israelites as the Chosen people turning to their God in times of threat (e.g., at the pursuit of

Pharaoh in the Exodus event: Exodus 14:11). In turn there continues to be evidence that Christians, especially in times of crisis or distress, turn to God seeking support, solace and direction through difficult and challenging life experiences (Mytko & Knight, 1999; Worthington, 1989). The relational nature of Christians' continued reliance upon, and allegiance to God appears to transcend denominational, doctrinal and religious institutional boundaries (Rolnick, 2007). An attachment theory perspective offers a new viewpoint for considering how patterns of relating to God develop and function in the Christian experience, especially with respect to the provision of protection and the facilitation of emotional security.

### *Relationship with God: An Attachment Bond*

Elements of the Christian relationship with God have been conceptualized as an attachment bond, a bond which is deemed foundational within the broader relationship (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 1999; Miner, 2007; Proctor, 2006; Proctor, Miner, & Dowson, in review. This bond involves:

- i. God who psychologically functions to provide:
  - (a) Protection and comfort in times of threat (*haven of safety function of attachment*); and
  - (b) A psycho-spiritual base from which Christians move forward to explore and engage life (*secure base function of attachment*); and
- ii. The Christian believer who *ideally*: (a) Relies upon God's protection, support and comfort when faced with threat (external or internal), and (b) Confidently moves toward and embraces life, strengthened by his/her knowledge of God's future willingness to respond in future times of new threat (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 1999).

More broadly, Kirkpatrick (1994, 1995, 1999, 2005) has proposed that attachment to God meets the criteria of an attachment relationship as proposed by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and extended by Ainsworth (1973). He argues that criteria which characterizes the parent-child attachment bond (e.g., proximity seeking behavior of a child especially when threatened; considering the attachment figure as a source of solace and protection and seeking comfort from the figure when distressed; considering the attachment figure as a secure base upon whom to rely when exploring the environment; and protest the separation of the attachment figure) like-

wise can be seen in the human-divine relationship (Grannqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 1994-1999, 2005).

### *Individual Variation in Attachment Patterns*

There is variation in the quality of the human attachment bond as it is experienced at the level of the individual. When an attachment bond functions optimally an individual is deemed to have a *secure* attachment, the psychological experience of *felt security*. When a secure (optimal) attachment bond is consistently experienced, the individual acquires a positive sense of self as loveable and worthy of his/her significant other(s)'s support, comfort, protection and help and learns to flexibly regulate his or her emotions (Schoore, 2003). Likewise, significant others and more broadly the world come to be viewed in positive ways. The 'other' (the attachment figure) is experienced as supportive, caring, comforting, protective and helpful while the world is experienced as a place for exploration and positive engagement (Ainsworth, 1985a; Bowlby, 1988; Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Conversely, when individuals are exposed to less than optimal attachment experiences during their childhood they are likely to develop an *insecure* attachment bond and are less able to flexibly regulate their emotions (Schoore, 2003)

Three distinct organized human attachment patterns were initially identified by infant attachment researchers, these subsequently labeled: *secure-autonomous*, *anxious-resistant* and *anxious-avoidant* attachment (Ainsworth, 1972, 1973, 1985a, 1985b; Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971). Table 1 describes the relational interaction associated with each attachment pattern. The three category model of *organized* attachment patterns (hereafter labeled the developmental attachment perspective) has dominated childhood attachment research, with George, Kaplan and Main (1996) extending the model to assessment of adult attachment patterns (e.g. Adult Attachment Interview). Proponents of the developmental attachment perspective consider attachment to be an unconscious state that is best measured using an interview (their primary methodological and assessment approach), the resulting transcript independently rated according to specified criteria (George & West, 2001; George, Kaplan & Main, 1996). They consider attachment to be context-driven/specific (George & West, 1999) with the notions of safe haven and secure base proposed as

central theoretical concepts (with attachment seen as a response strategy to threat experienced as detrimental to one's survival) (Ainsworth, 1985a, 1985b; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988). Within this perspective infant and adult expressions of attachment are "characterized by the same core representational features across the lifespan" (George & West, 1999, p.288). Finally all those insecurely attached are deemed to have a level of poor self-concept, that is, "to some degree ... negative (i.e) unworthy working models of the self" (George & West, 1999, p.289).

### *A Three- Category Model of Attachment to God: The Developmental Attachment Perspective*

The developmental perspective of attachment provides a coherent framework for conceptualising secure and insecure organised ATG patterns. It shifts assessment of ATG away from relying on self-report measures. Use of narrative data that is independently rated using a set of specific criteria is the assessment goal. However before this is possible, it is necessary to conceptualise and operationally define secure and insecure ATG within the developmental attachment perspective.

#### *1. Secure attachment to God*

Using the aforementioned human attachment patterns as a template for conceptualising an optimal ATG, it is proposed that the securely attached Christian is one who feels confident of God's ongoing presence, availability and responsiveness, especially in the face of adverse or threatening situations (*the safe haven function*). In the event the individual consistently experiences God as responsive, over time he or she confidently engages in his or her life journey, aware that God remains available should situations emerge where support, comfort, help and/or protection is needed. He or she willingly ventures forth into the world, even if to do so invites challenges and offers opportunities for growth (*the secure base function*). The securely attached Christian generally conceives of and experiences God in positive terms, for example, caring and protective (*a positive representational model of the attachment figure*). Likewise, the securely attached Christian also understands that he or she is loveable and generally worthy of God's love. Confident in that knowledge he or she feels reassured and encouraged to continue to value his/herself (*a positive representational model of the self*).

TABLE 1

*Childhood Attachment Patterns in the Developmental Attachment Perspective—  
The Three-Category Model of Attachment*

Childhood attachment patterns	Description of dyadic interaction
<i>Secure-autonomous</i>	The child feels confident of his/her primary care-givers' availability, responsiveness and helpfulness in the face of adverse or frightening situations; and is bold in his or her exploration of the world. Caregivers are sensitive to their child's signals, lovingly responding when protection and/or comfort is sought during times of threat, while promoting and supporting their child's exploratory behavior. <sup>a</sup>
<i>Anxious-resistant</i>	The child feels uncertain of his/her parents' availability, responsiveness, or helpfulness when it is required. This unpredictability induces separation anxiety within the child, resulting in clingy behaviour and unwillingness on the part of the child to engage in exploration of the world. In the absence of having predictable supportive, caring, comforting and protective care-givers, the child's sense of self becomes fragile. Seeking closeness and maintaining proximity to parents becomes the child's primary attachment goal rather than exploration of his or her environment, since venturing too far may result in the child finding him/herself without protection when it is most needed. <sup>b</sup>
<i>Anxious-avoidant</i>	The child appears to have no confidence that when he or she seeks help from his/her care-givers that it will be forthcoming. Care-givers may, in fact, rebuff the child's applications for assistance, leading to a child who, over time, becomes emotionally self-reliant and self contained, but at the cost of an underlying anxiety and an avoidance of a richer emotional life. Any dependence upon others is emotionally risky. Such a child does not seek protection in times of threat as there are no prior relational experiences to suggest to the child that attempting either to seek closeness to the caregiver or to elicit a response from his or her caregiver will yield a positive outcome. In response the developing child may manifest a defensive sense of self. <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1988; Sroufe & Waters, 1977

<sup>b</sup> Ainsworth, 1971, 1972, 1985; Ainsworth et al., 1973; Bowlby, 1988; Sroufe & Waters, 1977

## 2. *Insecure attachment to God*

Using the aforementioned insecure attachment patterns as a template, an individual insecurely attached to God either feels:

- i. Psychologically distant from and/or uninterested in God, reflected in a belief that God is unavailable and nonresponsive in times of threat (*insecure-avoidant (dismissing)*); or
- ii. Anxious, ambivalent and/or preoccupied about God's willingness to respond in times of threat, this reflected in a belief God is inconsistently available or responsive (hereafter labelled *insecure-anxious (preoccupied)*).

Whereas in infant attachment research these insecure patterns were labelled as avoidant and anxious,

George et al. (1996) in conceptualising organised adult attachment patterns labelled the patterns *dismissing* and *preoccupied*. Hereafter the latter terms are used as the focus of the current study is adult ATG patterns.

More specifically, the individual who forms a dismissing ATG would experience there to be a distance between God and himself or herself. The distance is likely to be characterized by a sense God had withdrawn from, withheld and/or had abandoned him or her, especially during times of need (*absence of haven of safety function*). This contributes to the individual's perception of God as unavailable, inaccessible and unresponsive. Alternately, he or she may perceive God is uninterested in

him or her at the level of the 'personal' (*negative representational models of God*). Such an individual may devalue, dismiss or discount his or her relationship with God, minimizing the relevance of the relationship in his or her life. He or she would likely avoid reliance upon God, possibly reporting a desire to stand on his or her own feet, with claims to personal strength and independence from God (*absence of secure base function*). Such individuals may report a range of self esteem states, from an overall devaluing of oneself such as 'I'm not worth anything' to a confidence in the self that in reality lacks depth, a defensive position such as 'I'm fine, there's nothing wrong with me' (*negative representational model of self*).

By comparison, the individual with a preoccupied ATG will experience God as inconsistently available or responsive, especially at times of threat. Whereas there is an expressed desire on the part of the individual for God's protection at such times, God's actual protection is experienced as varying. Even when protection is experienced the individual may anticipate that God's presence and support will be withdrawn at some point in time (*fluctuating/inconsistent haven of safety function*). This contributes to the individual experiencing an enduring sense of uncertainty, with God experienced as unpredictable. Such an individual might report oscillating or varying feelings about God, never sure of whether God will be available to him or her. Venturing out and exploring life would be experienced as threatening as he or she could find himself or herself without aid and support, especially when it might be most needed (*absence of secure base function*). This contributes to a sense of confusion and can potentially lead to a shift in how the individual thinks and feels about God (*fluctuating-mixed representational model of God*). Likewise, the individual may lack clarity or certainty about how God feels about him or her and/or how he or she thinks and feels about him or herself. Relational uncertainty may lead to a preoccupation with his or her relationship with God, wherein he or she may experience levels of anxiety and/or ambivalence regarding the relationship. Equally the individual would likely feel uncertain about his or her own worthiness in the eyes of God, unsure whether he or she merited God's love and attention. The experience of God's absence, distance and/or perceived withdrawal of protection would likely be attributed to some sense

of lack within the self. Statements such as '*if I am all right as a person, why doesn't God respond in my time of need?*' would characterize this sense of self (*negative representational model of self*). Table 2 summarizes the representational models of self and God as an attachment figure for each of the hypothesized ATG patterns, hereafter called *ATG profiles*. These are labelled autonomous-secure, insecure-preoccupied and insecure-dismissing. The three hypothesized ATG profiles, although derived from attachment theory and prior psychology of religion research, are presented as *potential* profiles. It is this potentiality (in their operationally defined form) which is the focus of the current article.

### *Drawing Together Attachment Theory and Christian Religious Experience*

The conceptualizations of secure and insecure ATG hypothesized above go beyond Ainsworth's behavioural observation of infant attachment, while nonetheless retaining the essence of attachment described by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980, 1988) and Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1972, 1973, 1985a, 1985b; Ainsworth et al., 1971). Two key functions of attachment, haven of safety and secure base—well described by both human attachment theorists (for example, see Bowlby, 1988) and reframed by prior ATG researchers (for example, see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 1995, 1997a, 1999, 2005) are included in the ATG profile definitions described above. In addition, the definitions include the (i) Cognitive component of attachment integral to adult conceptualizations of attachment framed within the cognitive-social attachment perspective (for example, see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew, 1994; Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Bartholomew & Moretti, 2002; Collins & Read, 1990, 1994; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a, 1994b; Hazan & Shaver, 1987); and the (ii) Affect-relational component central to conceptualizations of adult attachment framed within the developmental attachment perspective (see George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996; George & West, 1999; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1987; Main, 2000). Both adult attachment perspectives have their conceptual grounding in Bowlby's theory of attachment (1969, 1973, 1980) and offer important insights into attachment. While to date most ATG researchers position their research within the cognitive-social perspective (for example, see Beck & McDonald, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1997b,

TABLE 2

*Definitions of model of self and models of God for the secure and insecure ATG profiles<sup>a</sup>*

ATG PROFILES	REPRESENTATIONAL MODEL OF 'SELF'	REPRESENTATIONAL MODEL OF GOD AS 'OTHER'
Secure-autonomous	Appreciate and value themselves; understanding that they are loved by God. Find a confidence in that knowledge that reassures and encourages them to continue to value themselves, with the result that they feel comfortable in and engaged with their life journey, exploring both their external and internal world.	God is perceived as available, caring, supportive and responsive to the individual's needs especially when adverse situations are being faced, a God who has and continues to lovingly respond when God's protection and/or comfort is sought.
Insecure anxious/preoccupied	Experience uncertainty about their own worth, possibly reflected in statements such 'If I am ok why is God not there for me?' One's worth and value as a person related to his/her perception of God's absence and/or withdrawal from him/her.	God is perceived as inconsistently available or responsive, one whose presence and support may be withdrawn at any time, a God whose feelings about the believer are perceived as lacking clarity or certainty from the believer's perspective, such that the believer is unable to accurately identify God's feeling for and or valuing about them.
Insecure-dismissing	One's sense of self may range from an overall devaluing of oneself such as 'I'm not worth anything' to a confidence in self, that may not in reality entail depth, a defensive position such as 'I'm fine, there's nothing wrong with me.'	God is perceived as distant, withdrawn from and/or abandoning of him/her, especially during times of need. Alternately God is perceived as generally disinterested in the at the level of the 'personal,' and as lacking relevance for the believer, not one to be relied upon for strength or support.

<sup>a</sup> Hesse, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 1999, 1998, 1997a, 1997b, 1995; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002.

1998; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Sim & Loh, 2003), there have been more recent attempts to explore ATG using the developmental attachment perspective (Hall, 2004, 2005; Proctor, 2006). As previously noted, the two approaches differ in their choice of assessment strategies. While self-report measures (largely used by proponents of the cognitive-social attachment perspective) provide a quick means of tapping into Christians' conscious ATG experiences, interviews offer the opportunity to tap both conscious and unconscious material and consequently both implicit and explicit ATG representations (see Proctor, 2006; Proctor et al., in review).

#### *Assessing Attachment to God: Developing a New Approach*

To date ATG has generally been assessed using either categorical or dimensional self-report mea-

asures (See, Kirkpatrick and Shaver's (1992) three category classification of ATG; Kirkpatrick (1997b, 1998) modified version of Bartholomew and Horowitz's adult attachment model (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991); Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002) two dimension assessment of ATG). More recently developed measures of attachment to God include: *ACSS<sup>1</sup>—God Attachment Scale* (Proctor, Miner, & Dowson, in review); *Attachment to God Inventory* (Beck & McDonald, 2004); and the *Attachment to God Measure* (Sim & Loh, 2003). What characterizes all these measures is they require that participants report about their ATG without having to provide any specific relational evidence to substantiate their ATG claims. Generally the measures focus on assessing God functioning as protector and comforter (haven of safety function); however, God

<sup>1</sup> ASCC – Australian Centre for Studies in Spirituality.

as a Christian's source of security (secure base function) is generally overlooked. Neither do short self-report measures provide the depth of information that might prove to be useful in a therapeutic setting. Equally they are liable to biases due to impression management, individuals seeking to present their relationship with God in a positive light.

Moving toward the use of interviews can help counter overt impression management by a client/patient/respondent, for it is more challenging to sustain intentional impression management throughout an interview. This is a particular case of the debate in the general attachment literature on the respective place, merits and overlap of self-reports and interviews (Jacobitz, Curran, & Moller, 2002; Roisman, Holland, Fortuna, Fraley, Clausell, & Clarke, 2007). There are other advantages to assessing ATG using an interview. As Bartholomew and Moretti (2002) noted, interviews provide "rich clinical material", are "valuable for clarifying attachment-related concepts and processes and for generating new ideas and hypotheses", and provide "a way of understanding the psychological meaning of attachment within the unique context of an individual's life" (Bartholomew & Moretti 2002, pp.164-165). For example, during an interview information about events which activate the attachment system and elicit attachment behaviours can be explored. More broadly an interview format is ideal for eliciting affectively-laden and behavioural expressions of an individual's relationship with God, as well as eliciting details about how the individual conceptualizes God. Moreover, unlike self reports, interviews do not arbitrarily constrain individuals' response options and present an opportunity to tap into the complexity and richness of an individual's relationship with God.

### *Conceptualization of Specific Attachment to God Profiles*

In seeking to develop a procedure for assessing Christians' relationship with God using narrative data, three research tasks were undertaken. These tasks included:

- i. Conceptualization of three ATG profiles (outlined above);
- ii. Operationally defining the profiles as a series of specific relational markers; and
- iii. Examining Christians' relationship with God narratives for specific 'in vivo' evidence of the specific relational markers.

Once these tasks were completed a fourth task would involve the development of a strategy (i.e., a coding system) for assignment of an overall ATG profile to an individual narrative. This latter task was not an objective of the current study.

### *Operationally Defining the Three Attachment to God Profiles*

Each of the three hypothesized (potential) ATG profiles definitions was operationally defined as a set of specific relational markers. This involved identifying the key elements of each of the ATG profile conceptualizations covering aspects of cognition (concepts of self and other), relationship (affectively charged valuing and experiencing the relationship) and personal-behavioural indicators of relational quality. The goal was to provide concise, relevant markers that exactly covered each key element. Key elements were drawn from the literature on human attachment and attachment to God, with particular attention paid to the secure base function, as discussed more fully below.

#### *1. Secure attachment to God profile markers*

A total of six relational markers operationally defined the secure ATG profile. Marker 1, labeled '*positive concept of God*' (model of God as other) addressed the positive characteristics (cognitions) of God as an attachment figure. A positive concept of God was characterized by terms such as loving, caring, available, responsive, comforting and protecting. The descriptors (positive for secure ATG and negative for insecure ATG) were largely drawn from the Christian Bible. The Old Testament (OT) is resplendent with images used to communicate information about the nature of God, or at least of the attempt by humans to conceive of the "incomprehensible reality of God" (Bracken, 2002, p.362). One such example is: "This God—how perfect are his deeds! How dependable are his words! He is like a shield for all who seek his protection" (Psalm 18: 30). Marker two addressed the overall *affective* quality of an individual's ATG experiences. For example, secure ATG relational experiences would consist of *generally* positive relational experiences, these analogous to the positive attachment experiences of children identified in infant attachment literature (Ainsworth et al., 1971). Marker three addressed how the ATG relationship was *valued* by the individual. For example, in the case of the securely attached individual, it would be

expected an individual would report valuing his/her relationship with God.

Secure ATG not only involves being consistently protected in times of threat, it also involves confident exploration of, and engagement in life's journey. Exploration and engagement are possible because the individual is aware that God remains available should situations emerge where support, comfort, help and/or protection is needed. The remaining markers for the secure ATG profile addressed this secure base function of ATG. However conceptualizing how the secure base function might manifest proved challenging. While broadly mentioned in the ATG literature, this function of ATG is generally not well defined.

More recently, Beck (2006) addressed the question: *'How might this secure base dynamic manifest itself in a relationship with God?' He suggested a number of attributes as potential expressions of the secure base function. They included: (i) "the believer reaps the confidence to face new challenges" which derives from passages such as "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13); (ii) The seeking of experiences within the experiential and emotional sphere of religious life via "prayer, worship, or practice of spiritual disciplines", (iii) Possible periods wherein there is some experience of felt separation or alienation from God; (iv) Less anxiety about angering God if one discusses "new, potentially radical, theological ideas"; and (v) Exploration of "deeper or alternative theological formulations of his/her faith" (Beck, 2006, pp. 126-127).*

In emphasizing theological exploration as an essential component of the secure base function of ATG, Beck links into Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis (1993)'s Quest religious orientation research. More specifically Beck notes that Quest "captures a religious orientation that involves three facets: (a) The feeling that doubt is a positive experience; (b) A willingness to change religious views across the lifespan; and (c) The presence of existential questions which stimulate religious inquiry" (Beck, 2006, p.126). While not suggesting that the secure base function and questing are the same, nevertheless Beck suggests that some aspects of questing are related to theological exploration, which Beck considers as a key expression/manifestation of the secure base function. Similarly, from the area of general adult attachment, the Adult Attachment Interview (the gold standard for assessing adult human attachment) defines the secure/autonomous state of

mind as entailing the capacity to examine both positive and negative experiences and to flexibly change one's view of a particular relationship or experience in the light of a fresh examination of the evidence (Main & Goldwyn, 1998).

Some of Beck's (2006) markers of the secure base function have likewise been considered by the current authors, but are expressed as affective-cognitive attributes required for the psycho-spiritual exploration of one's life journey. For example, marker 4 labelled '*comfortable questioning*' (defined as freedom and/or comfortableness to question and examine one's beliefs) is an attitudinal position that might find expression in Beck's attributes of less anxiety about angering God if one discusses "new, potentially radical, theological ideas" (Beck, 2006, p.127), and exploration of "*deeper or alternative theological formulations of his/her faith*" (Beck, 2006, p.126). Likewise, marker 5 labelled '*Doubting accepted*' (defined as recognition of doubt as a part of a healthy relationship, with possible discomfort about the doubts, and acceptance of their presence) is an attitudinal position that would accommodate a number of Beck's secure base attributes, including possible periods where there is some experience of felt separation or alienation from God (Beck, 2006, p.126) and less anxiety about angering God if one discusses "*new, potentially radical, theological ideas*" (Beck, 2006, p.127). This also speaks to the freedom of perspective and thought that is central to Main and Goldwyn's view of the secure/autonomous state of mind (Main & Goldwyn, 1998; Main, 2000). Finally, the last secure ATG marker 6 labelled '*Integration*' (defined as a capacity to reflectively embrace and integrate positive and negative life experiences within his/her spiritual framework and relationship with God) is intended to capture and communicate a sense of movement/progression within the relationship and the central ability of security to integrate diverse experiences in a coherent way that can acknowledge disparity. Again this marker reflects an underlying attitudinal position. Taken together markers 4, 5 and 6 operationally define the *secure base* function of ATG proposed by the current authors. They denote an affective-cognitive attitude that underpins the psycho-spiritual exploration of life and relationship with God. In general, the ATG relational markers are hypothesized to capture the key elements the hypothesized secure ATG profile. They also formed the basis of the template used for coding individuals' narrative account of their relationship with God.

## 2. *Insecure attachment to God profile markers*

A total of five relational markers were deemed to operationally define each of the insecure ATG profiles. Marker one for each profile addressed less positive to negative cognitions about God. Marker two addressed the overall *affective* quality of an insecurely attached individual's relational experiences. For example, the preoccupied relationship would be characterized by relational inconsistency, the dismissing by relational avoidance and distance. These less optimal attachment experiences are analogous to attachment experiences of insecurely attached children identified in AAI literature (Ainsworth et al., 1971). Marker three addressed the extent to which the ATG relationship was *valued* by the individual. Insecurely attached individuals would experience their relationship with God as problematic. In preoccupied attachment, given the perceived unpredictability of God's responsiveness, there would likely be a preoccupation with the relationship that was characterized by expressions of anxiety and/or ambivalence as the individual struggled to remain confident of God's preparedness to provide protection in the event of threat. In terms of the underlying attachment system, attachment-related anxiety contributes to the activation of attachment figures' representations and elicits attachment-related behaviour such as proximity seeking. The aim of this behaviour is to obtain closeness to the attachment figure so as to ensure protection is obtained in the event of new threat (Mikulincer, Gillath & Shaver, 2002). By comparison, the insecure-dismissing individual would likely devalue, dismiss and/or discount his or her relationship with God. The absence of prior positive experiences of God providing protection during times of threat contributes to attachment avoidance. In terms of the underlying attachment system this manifests as inhibition of the system itself. Outwardly, this individual is unlikely to demonstrate any signs of proximity seeking behaviour, as there is no expectation that God will respond should he or she emit signs of feeling threatened (Mikulincer et al., 2002). Markers four and five relate to sense of self and God in relation to the possibility of a secure base function. In the case of the preoccupied profile markers four and five address the individual's uncertainty regarding self worth and their anxious and ambivalent feelings about God. For the dismissing profile these markers address model of self (a defensive, independent sense of self) and the general tendency to regard relationship with God negatively. Taken together the five preoccupied and five dismissing markers were deemed to

operationally define the hypothesized insecure-preoccupied and insecure-dismissing ATG profiles.

No secure base markers were developed in relation to the insecure profiles since failure to resolve and/or obtain consistent protection in times of threat (that is, to experience the haven of safety function of attachment) would prevent development of the secure base function within an insecurely attached individual's relationship with God. This contention is premised on human attachment experiences, wherein environmental exploration (*physical and/or psychological*) has been shown only to occur when an individual feels confident that his or her attachment figures are available. This knowledge provides the secure base from which exploration can safely occur (Bowlby, 1988). Such knowledge is generally less stable for the preoccupied person and absent for the dismissing person, whether experiencing a human or spiritual attachment bond. Taken together the five preoccupied and the five dismissing markers were deemed to be operational expressions of the hypothesized insecure ATG profiles. They, along with the secure markers formed the template used for coding individuals' narrative account of their relationship with God. The relational markers for each of ATG profile is summarized in Table 3.

### *The current study*

The aim of the current study was to (i) conceptualize three theoretically-derived ATG profiles; (ii) operationally define the potential profiles as a series of specific relational markers; and (iii) examine Christians' relationship with God narratives for specific 'in vivo' evidence of the relational markers. Taken together these three tasks formed the first stage in verifying that the hypothesized (potential) ATG profiles have a basis in Christians' actual (in-vivo) relationship with God experiences.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Thirty-one participants ranging in age from 18 to 77 years ( $M = 39.5$  years) participated in the study (21 females, 10 males; 29 Australian-born). They reported their Christian religious affiliation as Catholic ( $n = 20$ ), various Protestant denominations ( $n = 9$ ), and other mainstream Christian faith communities ( $n = 2$ ). Participants were a convenience sample of local church community members from the metropolitan Sydney & Central Coast areas of

TABLE 3

*Attachment to God relational markers, including marker definitions*

Marker Number	SecureATG relational markers	Preoccupied ATG relational markers	Dismissing ATG relational markers
1	<b>Positive concept of God:</b> A concept of God characterized by terms and experiences such as: God as loving, caring, available, responsive, comforting, protecting.	<b>Fluctuating concept of God:</b> God characterized as available to an extent; responsive but with questionable consistency; present and supportive, but with an anticipation of withdrawal of said presence at any point in time.	<b>Negative concept of God:</b> God characterized as impersonal, distant, unavailable, unresponsive, and uninterested in their personal affairs
2	<b>Positive relational experiences:</b> Relational experiences which are predominately positive in tone.	<b>Mixed relational experiences:</b> Relational experiences that are mixed (positive and negative) in their tonal content	<b>Negative relationship experiences:</b> Relational experiences where negative experiences tend to override recollection of neutral or positive experiences.
3	<b>Values relationship with God:</b> Report valuing of his/her relationship with God.	<b>Preoccupied with relationship:</b> Moderate to excessive preoccupation with his/her relationship with God.	<b>Negates relationship:</b> Devaluing, dismissing or discounting of his/her relationship with God.
4	<b>Comfortable questioning:</b> Freedom and/or comfortableness to question and examine his/her beliefs.	<b>Questions value to God:</b> A lack of clarity or certainty with respect to God's feeling or valuing of him/her, with the result that he/she is uncertain about how he/she feels about the relationship.	<b>Stand Alone:</b> An avoidance of relying upon God, where he/she reports wanting to stand on his/her own feet, claiming personal strength or independence.
5	<b>Doubting accepted:</b> Recognition of doubt as a part of a healthy relationship, with possible discomfort about the doubts, and acceptance of their presence.	<b>Sense of confusion:</b> Report a sense of confusion about how he/she feels about God	<b>Negative bias:</b> Negative experiences tend to override recollection of neutral or positive experiences.
6	<b>Integration:</b> A capacity to reflectively embrace and integrate positive and negative life experiences within his/her spiritual framework and relationship with God.		

NSW, Australia and first year psychology students from the School of Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Australia. Participants were required to be of a Christian background. They were not required to currently be engaged in religious activities.

### Measure

The *God Attachment Interview Schedule* (GAIS) (Proctor, 2006) is an autobiographical narrative interview protocol used for assessing an adult's 'state of mind' with respect to his or her attachment to God. It is a semi-structured interview protocol that requires approximately 1 to 1½ hours to complete. The relational narrative is deemed to be a subjective account of the recollections of the individual

about his or her childhood, adolescent and current adult relationship with God (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985; Main & Goldwyn, 1998). The interview questions are open, do not use terms from attachment theory and do not lead respondents to frame answers in any particular way. Conceptually the protocol is set within an attachment developmental perspective. The GAIS allows for a consideration of narrative content (explicit ATG relational representations) independent of the manner in which a narrative is delivered (deemed to reflect implicit ATG relational representations). The interview narrative is able to be assessed in terms of both ATG profiles and ATG states of mind (Proctor, 2006).

### Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Western Sydney's Human Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study. Interviews were conducted at time of mutual convenience to both the interviewer and interviewee. Written consent was obtained prior to the interview, with participants debriefed at the conclusion of their interview. All interviews were conducted by the first author. In addition, after completing their interview participants completed a self-report measure of ATG, the ACSS-GAS (Australasian Centre for Studies in Spirituality–God Attachment Scale) (Proctor et al., in review).

The goal of this study, and more broadly of qualitative research, is to develop a deep, rich and broad understanding of the phenomena under investigation. In the context of data collection and analysis the issues of importance are the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of findings and not statistical significance (as per quantitative research) (Krefting, 1991). Illustration of a phenomenon is a crucial: it is the first step in confirming that theoretically-derived concepts have a basis in lived experience. In this case the goal was to illustrate, if possible, that Christians experience their attachment to God *'in vivo'*—in ways that are consistent with present theoretical thinking about human and ATG thinking.

### Interview Analysis

The GAIS narrative transcripts were fully transcribed then analysed using the ATG relational marker coding template. Each narrative was examined for specific relationship with God experiences that satisfied any of the markers' definitions. This process yielded a sub-set of relational examples for each of the secure and insecure markers, examples of which are provided in the findings. Data was stored in and managed using the software program NVivo (QSR International, NVivo).

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The current study had several objectives: to conceptually define three ATG profiles (these deemed to potentially exist), to operationally define said profiles as a series of specific relational markers, and to explore participants' relationship with God narratives for specific examples of the relational markers. While a longer term goal is to undertake profile analysis at the level of an individual narrative, the aim of

the current paper was to explore the potentiality of the hypothesized ATG profiles in their operationally defined form: as a set of specific relational markers. Thus at this time no attempt was made to assign an overall ATG profile to the 31 individual transcripts. A strategy to guide that that process is still being developed. At this point in time the primary interest was in exploring if the relational markers were able to be detected within a variety of narrative accounts of individuals' relationships with God experiences.

### Attachment to God Profile Markers

The participants' narrative accounts varied both in the depth and richness of detail they contained regarding their relationships with God experiences, as well as in terms of the overall narrative coherency of participants' conversational discourse (Proctor, 2006). Content analysis of the transcripts revealed relational evidence supportive of both the secure and insecure ATG profile relational markers.

### Secure-Autonomous ATG Profile Markers

Analysis revealed ample relationship with God experiences that met the definitional criteria for the first three secure ATG markers: positive God concept, positive relational experiences, and valuing of relationship with God. As the following selection of excerpts show, some participants conceptualized God in positive ways (Marker 1: *'Positive concept of God'*), characterizations that are consistent with those associated with human attachment figures (Bowlby 1973, 1978 1988; Bartholomew, 1991).

(P25): *'... I guess that God is far greater than I ... I have this conviction and knowledge of God being my father and of being, I guess God being my primary care giver, ... of God being primarily the one who looks after me and of loving God more, loving who God is'.*

(P24): *'I always believed He was constantly around, that He was there if I needed to ask something.... You could always turn to if you needed help or if you were in trouble'.*

(P22): *'like caring, like powerful, like my father'.*

(P16): *'I still had the feeling that He was a caring person and that He always looked down on me'.*

Likewise, there were ample examples of participants experiencing aspects of their relationship with God positively (Marker 2: *'Positive relational experiences'*):

(P1): *'There's just a general feeling that God's walking with me this time, I feel that He's walking with me'.*

(P27): *'I feel that God is with me all the time and that's a great comfort to me'.*

(P29): *'I found that He's always been there, if I have a problem I can always turn that way and everything seems to be easier'.*

(P20): *'His arms were around me just rocking me'.*

(P4): *'When I'm trying to deal with a stressful situation I sometimes feel a real sense of peace or reassurance which for me, is a sign that He is caring for me, that He is supporting me through it'.*

So, too, some participants reported valuing their relationship with God (Marker 3 '*Values relationship with God*'). In some instances this relationship was described as pivotal, the following excerpts illustrative of the centrality of this relationship in the lives of some participants:

(P2): *'My relationship with God is something that is to be lived through every minute of my life, not just something that poured on and off on Sunday which is what it was like in childhood. So I suppose through adolescence and adulthood it's more, my faith is more integral part of my life and my relationship is integral and more a part of me'.*

(P30): *'It's different, it's a relationship that I suppose I don't have with anyone else who I consider to be close to me, which is how I know it's different, it's special'.*

Fewer relationship experiences were identified that met the definitional criteria of the remaining three secure ATG markers—those that operationally define the secure base function of ATG. For example, only a limited number of participants appeared to feel free and comfortable to question and examine their beliefs (Marker 4: '*Comfortable questioning*'). In the following sample excerpt a participant speaks of times when he/she had reviewed and reflected about his/her understanding of the nature of God, his/her perception of God's responsiveness and of his/her own decision to surrender to God's timing of life events:

(P25): *'There were times when I looked back where there are obvious things where I had a great concern for something to happen and then it didn't happen and again they were times for me to realize that God is different to me.... I think there were times when I was confused but there was much quicker realization 'Well okay God. I'm very small God, you're much bigger than me, you're different to me and so I'm going to go with what you think rather than what I think'.*

Likewise, only a small number of experiences were assigned to Marker 5: '*Doubting accepted*'. The following sample excerpt captures both the sense of tension that is experienced when an individual struggles with relational doubt and the discomfort experienced during such times:

(P2): *'I needed to wrestle that loss happens, that I lost my Dad and things were not predictable, that life wasn't predictable and that had an impact on how I saw God 'cause if God was holding everything and everything was in God, how could this happen? So I think coming to some sort of resolution that bad things can happen, I suppose God doesn't give me anymore than I can cope with, deal with, it just made my faith and my relationship with God more complex. I really think that losing Dad early put me on the road to being more independent and thinking things around and whether that gave another push for my relationship with God to be more mature'.*

Similarly only a few participants reported experiences deemed to reflect a capacity to reflectively embrace and integrate positive and negative life experiences within his or her spiritual framework and relationship with God (Marker 6: '*Integration*'). The following example captures the essence of this marker, the participant recounting the process of reflection that occurred she sought to understand and achieve a sense of cohesion within her relationship with God:

(P27): *'I feel that in the periods of my life where I've been quite low, I can see that God has basically done a great deal to bring me out of the pit and I feel today that all good things have come from Him and when things happen that it's not necessarily the sin in my life ... it's important not to curse God because He says 'Are you just going to take the good stuff and not the bad as well?' and I'd rather God be in control of the bad stuff than not, so I think God gives me perspective and strength to get through those things'.*

More broadly, while there was an abundance of relational examples that related to the haven of safety function of secure ATG (Markers 1, 2 and 3), there far fewer relational examples that related to the secure base function of secure ATG (Markers 4, 5, and 6).

### *Insecure Preoccupied ATG Profile Markers*

Analysis revealed relational experiences that met the definitional criteria of the five preoccupied ATG relational markers. For example, the following sample extract illustrates how one participant experienced his ideas of God fluctuating (Marker 1 '*Fluctuating concept of God*')

(P14): *'It's just the fact of searching and the road is not smooth when you're searching for God. I don't find it smooth and I just seem to fluctuate between perhaps He's here at one time and He's not there at another time' (God as inconsistently present).*

In some instances participants reported a shift rather than fluctuations in their God concept. Taken in isolation it is impossible to determine whether these changes marks part of an ongoing

movement in their conceptualization of God. For example, in the excerpt below the participant appears to have attained a more sophisticated concept of God. This could be the result of affective-cognitive maturation, religious socialization and/or religious education:

(P19): *'My concept of God in adolescence, I still believed that He existed and that He was there but I didn't think of Him as that picture any more. I knew that He couldn't possibly be, His form couldn't be that way, He could have blond hair; He could not necessarily wear a robe'.*

To meet the *'fluctuating concept of God'* marker's definition an individual transcript would need to be scrutinized to see whether a reported shift in God concept was an enduring change or whether the individual experienced further changes/shifts in their God concept. Further shifts, should they be detected, might allow one to classify an overall fluctuating God concept.

Analysis revealed relational experiences that met the definitional criteria of the five preoccupied markers. The following selection of transcript excerpts is tendered to illustrate the type of experience that was deemed to meet these markers' definitions:

Marker 2: *'Mixed relational experiences'*

(P21): *'When I started to experience difficult things ... and I didn't understand why. Like was I being punished or things like that...my preconception was that He was going to protect me and He doesn't seem to be in these circumstances He mustn't be there'.*

Marker 3: *'Questions value to God'*

(P4): *'The main thing my relationship with God is a bit uncertain because I'm not sure where I stand in God's eyes and I'm not sure what type of relationship I have with God at the moment ... whether God still loves me and still accepts me'.*

Marker 4: *'Preoccupied with relationship'*

(P14): *'I've tried to, I need to get closer to Him, I think I'm searching more sincerely and more deeply for Him'.... It's utterly necessary to me, I cannot be without Him. He's supporting me; it's more of a God-creature relationship... I need to be as close to Him as possible'.*

Marker 5: *'Sense of confusion'*

(P17): *'He hasn't seemed to be there and I got to a point where I really didn't think He was there and it didn't make sense that He wouldn't help to honour our marriage, ...I got to a point where it really made sense to dismiss God although and reject Him but I knew what that would lead to,...Like I've been down that road before on a lesser scale, ....I knew that ultimately it could only lead to despair'.*

*Insecure- dismissing ATG profile markers*

Analysis revealed some relational experiences in support of the dismissing ATG profile markers. However, relative to the other profile markers, among this participant sample there were fewer relational experiences able to be assigned to the dismissing markers. For example, a limited number of participants reported experiences that satisfied the definitional criteria of Marker 3: *'Negates relationship'*. These participants tended to dismiss or discount their relationship rather than devalue it. Cynical overtones were evident among their narrative recounts; it appeared over time some participants had retreated from, and did not anticipate being in a personal relationship with God or that God might respond during their times of need.

Likewise, only a few participants described relationships wherein negative experiences tended to override recollection of neutral or positive experiences (Marker 5: *'Negative bias'*). These participants reported relationships with God characterized by doubt, times of anger, uncertainty, and questioning, as well as periods where they recalled having struggled within the relationship. Sometimes their struggle related to the most fundamental issue—the existence of God. Positive relationship experiences, if mentioned, appeared to be restricted to either a specific period in the participant's life (childhood for participant No 12 and adulthood for participant No 17). God was described as distant from them, no longer necessarily prioritized as of importance in the individual's life. Diminishment of God's relevance often arose out of experiences of feeling abandoned by and/or disappointed in God, feelings associated with participants' perception that God had failed to respond during times of need or distress. Presenting evidence that supports the marker *'negative bias'* is problematic as the notion of a negative bias only makes sense when the entire transcript's. It is best examined and reported in the form of a case study (not possible in the current article).

Analysis revealed some relational experiences that met the definitional criteria of the remaining three dismissing markers, with the following selection tendered as examples:

Marker 1: *'Negative concept of God'*

(P4): *'God was portrayed as someone way out there .... my sense was that there was a void between us, therefore when I say my relationship with God was distant, no sense of closeness based on my upbringing'.*

Marker 2: 'Negative relationship experiences'

(P1) *'Those times of four defining events I felt God abandoning me, maybe punishing. I don't think that's it but it felt like that at least for a while where my own self worth was questioned in those times .... it definitely felt distant in terms of my relationship with God in those times and to a certain extent abandoned or rejected.'*

(P21): *'I think I felt betrayed, that He'd betrayed by trust, that I'd trusted Him for so long and He's broken it by not helping me, abandonment.'*

Marker 4: 'Stand Alone'

(P28): *'I forgot about him then, I didn't forget him, I didn't really talk as much to Him as prior, like to that, and prior, at the time I was really like distant and after that it was okay.'*

(P9): *'Why should I, what has He ever done for me, you know, and I need Him like I need a hole in the head, at this kind of stuff, you know. So it really means to a degree I was totally anti God.'*

**Representational Models of Self and God as Significant Other**

In addition to operationally defining ATG as a series of markers, the current study conceptualized ATG as a series of representational models of self and God as significant other (see Table 2).

**Representational Models of Self**

At the broader conceptual level, participants' representational models of self could be differentiated in theoretically meaningful ways. Those whose transcripts were tagged with secure ATG relational markers spoke in ways that suggested they understood themselves to be loveable in the eyes of God. They appeared to find confidence in this knowledge, such that they appreciated and valued themselves. Some spoke of drawing strength from their knowledge of God's love of them; as a result they felt comfortable in, and engaged with, their life journey. However, these latter elements of the secure self-perception were not experienced by all those reporting secure ATG experiences. It appeared a certain level of confidence in both God and self was required before individuals progressed to being able to manage their relational doubts, struggles and questioning in ways which ultimately led to a strengthening, rather than a weakening of their relationship with God.

The representational models of self of those whose transcripts were tagged with insecure ATG markers were less able to be theoretically differentiated in a

meaningful way. Their 'self' models included self doubt and concerns about their worthiness and value to God, this likely to have implications for their self-esteem. They appeared to make decisions about their self worth in light of God's actions, their value as a person seemingly related to their perception of God's valuing them. For example, a decline in some participants' positive self regard occurred when God was experienced as temporarily absent and/or withdrawing from them, the reverse being the case when they experienced their relationship in more positive ways. Conversely, no such fluctuations were evident in the model of self presented by those reporting relational experiences assigned to the dismissing ATG markers. However, tapping into these individuals' model of self was more problematic. There was an overall absence of relational experiences associated with representational models of self in these interviews. A tendency to focus on God rather than themselves in the context of their relationship with God rendered it difficult to gain a clear insight into these individuals' self perceptions, i.e. their model of self. Consequently model of self was more evident among participants reporting relational experiences assigned to the secure and preoccupied ATG markers.

**Representational Models of God as Significant Other**

At the broader conceptual level, participants' representational models of God could be differentiated in theoretically meaningful ways. Those reporting experiences assigned to the secure ATG markers (and *potentially* having a secure ATG profile) generally described God as accessible, responsive to their needs, and especially helpful when adverse situations were faced. God was experienced as readily available when required, One who lovingly responded when protection and/or comfort was sought. In comparison, those reporting relational experiences assigned to the preoccupied ATG markers (and *potentially* having an insecure-anxious/ preoccupied ATG profile) described God as inconsistently available or responsive. They experienced God's presence and support as varying, such that they lacked clarity or certainty as to whether they could rely upon God. This left them feeling uncertain and at times unable to accurately identify a sense of God valuing them. On the other hand, while experiencing disappointment about God's inconsistent presence in their lives, they reported being hopeful their relationship with

God might improve. Broadly these individuals reported a more positive representational model of God, relative to their less positive representational model of self.

Participants reporting relational experiences assigned to the dismissing ATG markers (and *potentially* having an insecure-dismissing ATG profile) presented a substantially more negative representational model of God. They described God as distant or withdrawn from and/or abandoning of them, especially during times of need. This contributed to their perception God had been and/or was unavailable, inaccessible and unresponsive and/or they experienced God as more generally uninterested in them, at times this coupled with a sense that God lacked relevance in their lives. As such these participants reported anticipating no improvement in their relationship with God and in some cases reported a progressive deterioration in both the quality and stability of their relationship with God. Unlike some participants who hoped God might be available to them and responsive when required (and were more likely to be tagged with preoccupied ATG markers), these individuals appeared to have no such future relational hopes (and were more likely to be tagged with dismissing ATG markers). These participants tended to focus more on dissatisfaction with God; also notable was the overall absence of relational experiences associated with representational models of self. This overall tendency to focus on God (model of other) rather than the self (model of self) could be regarded as a defensive posture that maintains the individual's sense of self worth in the face of experiencing God as inaccessible, unavailable and unresponsive.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The theoretically driven examination of the participants' relationship with God narratives revealed relational experiences in support of the hypothesized ATG profile markers. This marks a first and crucial step in the process of validating the theoretically-derived ATG profiles themselves. In addition, the findings which utilized interview data rather than self-report measures, generally lend support to the assumptions underpinning the prior empirical work of Kirkpatrick and colleagues (for example, see Kirkpatrick, 1997b, 1998).

Overall, much more relational evidence was able to be assigned to the secure compared to insecure (either preoccupied or dismissing) ATG relational

markers. While the study's parameters allowed for the possibility of participation by those who had previously but were not currently in a relationship with God, few such individuals elected to participate in the study. Indeed the current sample could be described as religious. For example, 87% of participants described themselves as '*currently Christian*' ( $n = 27/31$ ); 81% of the sample described themselves as '*moderately religious or greater*' ( $n = 25/31$ ), while 45% reported they were '*very to extremely religious*' ( $n = 13/31$ ). A majority of participants reported attending church '*at least once a month or more frequently*' ( $n = 25/31$ , 81%). This sample profile suggests the participants were engaged with rather than disengaged from their relationship with God. Consequently it could be anticipated such a sample would more likely report secure ATG experiences. It was less likely they would report relationships characterized by insecurity, but in the event they did, it they would more likely report experiences consistent with preoccupied ATG rather than dismissing ATG. Despite this, participants' ATG experiences when explored using the ATG relational markers could be differentiated in theoretically meaningful ways.

It should be noted that, unlike prior ATG research that has predominately been framed within a social-cognitive attachment perspective (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 1992-2005) the current study was conceptualized within the development attachment perspective. The latter perspective emphasizes use of narrative data and assessment by interview (George & West, 1999, 2001) and employs a 3-category classification model of *organized* attachment patterns (George et al., 1996) (rather than a 4 way categorization that would add a disorganized/unresolved adult attachment pattern)(Main and Goldwyn, 1998; Hesse, 1999; Hesse and Main, 2000). In this perspective the model of self in the dismissing category is not always so clear, that is, some of those having a negative concept of self and likely to be classified as fearful-avoidant on self-reports or as unresolved due to loss or trauma are likely to fall into the dismissing category when a three way split is used. This is an issue to be sorted out in further research with head-to-head comparisons with self-reports and with an AAI comparison or AAI-derived scoring. Notably in the current study there was a paucity of transcripts identified with insecure-dismissing attachment to God (ATG) markers (and potentially an overall dismissing ATG profile). A larger sample may yield a

greater representation of those with dismissing ATG, thus allowing for a more detailed examination of this subset of markers.

Although there has been considerable treatment of the safe haven function in ATG research, until recently there has been less consideration and analysis of ATG with respect to the secure base function. Our work contributes to understanding how God might function as a secure base. We conceptualized the secure base function as a predominately relational-attitudinal position with (subsequently discovered) links to Beck's conceptualization of this function. Of interest is that both the current study's authors and Beck independently arrived at similar markers, suggesting a resonance between the two conceptualizations of the secure base function (Beck, 2006) and construct validity. Consequently, finding relational evidence supportive of the current authors' secure base markers also provides some validation for Beck's conceptualization of the secure base function.

The current study highlights the benefits of using interviews rather than solely relying upon self-report measures for tapping into ATG. Interviewing participants revealed a depth of information about their explicit ATG representations, these coded by author 1 using the ATG relational marker coding template. Participants reported a range of relationship experiences, some subsequently defined as ATG experiences as per the operational definitions of ATG relational markers. In turn these attachment-related experiences are deemed to reflect the three hypothesized, theoretically-derived ATG profiles. Interviewing provides an important means by which the relative proportions of secure and insecure ATG profile presentations can be established. It avoids reliance upon the use of median split techniques which are sometimes used to create artificial groups by those assessing attachment via self-report tools. However, these artificial groups may not reflect the distribution of categories within the community.

The current study makes a number of significant contributions to ATG research. Whereas self-report measures address anxiety and avoidance and are deemed to tap the underlying dimensions of ATG-related anxiety and avoidance of intimacy, the profile markers are an attempt to articulate what is meant by anxiety (as in the potentially preoccupied profile) and avoidance (as in the potentially dismissing profile). The insecure markers define and contrast what is experienced as anxiety/preoccupation and avoid-

ance/dismissal in terms of affective and behavioral expressions - qualities generally not highlighted in self-report measures. Understanding about the nature and experience of anxiety and avoidance within ATG is expanded, with the current study adding depth to theorizing about the nature of insecure ATG experiences. In addition, the richly described theoretical markers have been verified by relational evidence within a given Christian sample. The finding that some markers were present across many interviews (e.g. models of self and other) whereas other markers were present to a very limited extent (e.g., secure base themes) indicates that the exercise was more than merely proof texting but one of genuine inquiry to try to discern whether participant responses were consistent with theory.

The next steps are to validate these markers using independent measures via a behavioral tool or implicit measures using discourse analysis (Proctor, 2006) or clinical interviews, as well as to seek validation against the gold standard of the AAI (with appropriate modifications). In this initial study we have not sought to develop markers for an Unresolved/Disorganized state of mind as it might apply to ATG. Nevertheless we acknowledge that in general attachment theory it constitutes a fourth and important state of mind that can follow loss and/or trauma and will undoubtedly find expression in the (i) narrative content of some Christians' relationship with God experiences (Main & Goldwyn, 1998; Hesse, 1999; Hesse & Main, 2000), and (ii) in marked coherency lapses in Christians' discourse about said relationship with God (Proctor, 2006). Development of relational markers for this disorganized ATG profile is planned as part of the next phase of research.

Validation of the ATG profile relational markers is an important milestone and first step in the development of a scoring protocol for assigning an overall ATG profile based on the narrated experiences of Christians. As a next step definitive criteria to guide assignment of an overall ATG profile classification are being developed. A coherent protocol for this process requires determining whether (a) there are sufficient relational markers present within an individual's interview to permit assignment of a specific ATG profile classification, (ii) which specific relational markers must be present, and (iii) how many and what, if any, relative weighting should be assigned to each marker (within a sub-set of markers, e.g. the secure ATG relational markers). It was prudent to

defer the development of a protocol for assignment of an overall ATG profile until relational evidence validating the hypothesized ATG relational markers was identified from within narrative accounts of Christians' relationship with God.

The work of marker validation has significance in itself. The ATG relational markers operationally defined and relationally substantiated using Christians' reports of their relationship with God, allow for detection of ATG at a deeper level than is presently possible using self-report measures. For example, whereas self-report measures currently inadequately address or tap secure base experiences, in this study the interview format and use of the coding template increased the likelihood the secure base function of ATG was detected. This greater depth of information obtained by interview may prove to be useful and important when working with clients within a psychotherapeutic setting, especially for clients of a religious/spiritual worldview. Certainly for psychologists lacking experience with such clients, the coding template provides both a theoretical framework and some specific markers for exploring ATG as a psycho-spiritual variable within the broader context of individuals' psychological health.

Analysis of profiles is an important and next step in our research. Such research permits consideration of issues associated with the development of ATG. For example, a prospective longitudinal study would enable developmental changes in ATG to be identified. Alternately, at the level of a given case, at a given point in time, an individual's narrative about his/her relationship with God could be analyzed to identify how the individual has experienced his/her relationship with God changing as they have matured (noting that this process involves retrospective reflection). However in order to undertake profile analysis it was important a-priori to operationally define each profile so that profile attributes (defined as a set of relational markers) are able to be identified within any narrative transcript. In addition, a strategy for assignment of an overall ATG profile classification to a given narrative is also required. Once these two steps are completed analysis at the level of overall profiles becomes possible.

### Conclusion

The current article reports on the process of operationally defining three hypothesized attachment to God profiles (secure, preoccupied and dismissing).

The profiles themselves, although derived from attachment theory and prior psychology of religion research, currently remain potential profiles. However it is this potentiality which has been the focus of the current article. The importance of the study lies in its rich theoretically derived description and elaboration of both the hypothesized (potential) ATG profiles and the operationally defined relational markers of the potential profiles. The empirical work has been in determining whether the set of relational markers could be discerned in the context of individuals' experience of their relationship with God. The study presents narrative evidence that attests to the fact that the individuals in the study's sample experienced aspects of their relationship in ways that are theoretically consistent with present understanding of the construct 'attachment to God' (framed within a three category model of attachment). Sampling from across a range of relationship experiences identified 'in vivo' evidence that satisfied the operational definitions of the relational markers. Analysis also revealed that the relational markers were present to different degrees in the participants' narratives, with some markers present across many interviews (e.g. models of self and other) while other markers were present to a very limited extent (e.g., secure base themes). Having found evidence of explicit ATG profile markers within the narratives in this sample, the foundation is laid to move to the study of implicit markers and strategies to assign an ATG profile to an individual narrative.

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## AUTHORS

PROCTOR, MARIE-THERESE. Address: 16 Hill Street, Picton, 2571, NSW, Australia. Email: m-tproctor@bigpond.com. Degrees: BA, Psych/Religious Studies; BA, Psych Hons, PhD. Titles: Research Fellow: Australasian Centre for Studies in Spirituality (ACSS); Psychologist & Researcher: Oncology Department, The Children's Hospital at Westmead (CHW), Sydney, Australia; Adjunct Research Fellow: International Program for Psycho-Social Research (IPP-SHR), Central Queensland University, Queensland, Australia; Adjunct Research Fellow: The School of Spirituality, Australian College of Ministries (ACOM), Sydney, Australia. Specializations: Spirituality (esp. implicit and explicit attachment to God) and health; development of attachment to God measures & spiritual assessment; pediatric illness and disability & psycho-social issues for children and their families, including bereavement, grief and loss; qualitative methods and mixed methods research.

MINER, MAUREEN. *Address:* Email: m.miner@uws.edu.au. *Degrees:* B.Sc. (Hons), M. Clin. Psych. PhD. *Titles:* Chair: Psychology and Spirituality Society & Senior Lecturer School of Psychology and PsyHealth Research Concentration, University of Western Sydney; Principal Research Fellow, Australian Centre for Studies in Spirituality (ACSS); Adjunct Senior Research Fellow: School of Spirituality, Australian College of Ministries (ACOM). *Specializations:* Antecedents of burnout and job satisfaction in church leaders; impact of attachment to God on psychological health; and the development of measures of Islamic attachment to God and spirituality.

McLEAN, LOYOLA. *Address:* Email: loymac@bigpond.net.au. *Degrees:* BA, MBBS (Hons); FRANZCP, PhD. *Titles:* Staff Specialist Psychiatrist, Psychotherapy Educator, Sydney West Area Health Service (SWAHS-NSW), affiliated with the University of Sydney;

Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist: private practice. *Specializations:* Attachment theory and psychosomatics, the psychophysiology of stress system disorders and the therapeutic consequences.

DEVENISH, STUART. *Address:* Email: sdevenish@spirituality-australia.com. *Degrees:* BTh, MA, Theology; PhD. *Titles:* Senior Research Fellow, Australian Centre for Studies in Spirituality (ACSS); Lecturer: Booth College, Salvation Army, Sydney, Australia. *Specializations:* Theology, ministry, spirituality, the psychology of religion and phenomenology

BONAB, BAGHER GHOBARY. *Address:* Email: bghobari@ut.ac.ir. *Degrees:* PhD, Special Education . *Title:* Associate Professor, University of Tehran, School of Psychology & Education. *Specializations:* Religious psychology, spirituality and developmental issues in children and adolescents.

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