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Predicting Estrangement from God Among Christians:

Preliminary Findings and Practice Implications

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Predicting Estrangement from God Among Christians:

Preliminary Findings and Practice Implications

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Abstract

Persons who come to counseling, especially Christians, often present with concerns about their relationships with God. Many clinicians have noted that alienation or estrangement from God is a common concern even among persons with conservative theological beliefs. They may say things like “I know God loves me, but I don’t feel like it.” Little is currently known about factors which may cause or predict such feelings. The present study explored factors which predict estrangement from God. Results indicated that estrangement from God is more likely among clients than among students. Estrangement from God can be strongly predicted by the absence of a personal profession of Christian faith, self report of having been harmed by a church, low capacity for empathic concern for others, difficulty forgiving others, difficulty obtaining spiritual resources, and seldom engaging in prayer for others. Among Christians all but the first factor may be helpful in identifying those who experience estrangement from God. Therapists can encourage clients to pray for, forgive, and develop empathy for others, help clients to access spiritual resources, and help them to resolve issues of harm by a church. These strategies may enhance their closeness to God.

Predicting Estrangement from God Among Christians:
Preliminary Findings and Practice Implications

Evangelical Christians often struggle with disappointment regarding the quality of their relationship with God. This experience has been referred to in the spiritual development literature as the “dark night of the soul”. For some the experience is a temporary one occurring at times of grief or disappointment, while for others it is an enduring aspect of daily life. This latter experience is frequently encountered among Christian clients seeking mental health counseling. In recent years there has been increasing concern about clergy abuse in the popular press, and several have written about spiritual abuse as a concern (e.g., Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991).

McDargh (1986) suggested that it makes no sense to tell persons who have never experienced human love that God is love. He implies that experiencing emotional closeness to fellow humans may play a vital role in empowering individuals to experience the love of God and to live out God’s call to love others. However, little research has yet explored personality factors or developmental experiences which are likely to be accompanied by feelings of estrangement from God. Research on loneliness, empathy, assertiveness, attachment, object relations, guilt, access to spiritual resources, and gender suggest that these factors may predict such estrangement.

Schwab and Petersen (1990) reported that loneliness is positively correlated with views of God as wrathful and negatively correlated with views He is helpful. Loneliness is negatively correlated with self-esteem (Shapurian, Hojat, & Nayerahmadi, 1987), which has been found to be a strong factor influencing concept of God (Buri & Mueller, 1993). Thus, it can tentatively be hypothesized that loneliness is also related to an individual’s experience of God.

Yancey (1988) suggested that absence of empathy may be important factor in estrangement from God. While direct evidence is lacking regarding the role of empathy in estrangement from God, several studies are consistent with Yancey’s hypothesis. Shelton and

McAdams (1990) found empathic ability and morality to be correlated. Watson and his colleagues found adaptive empathy positively related to healthy religious dependency and negatively related to manipulateness; empathic concern and perspective taking were in turn found to be negatively related to depression (Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1989). Depression and anxiety tend to evoke rejection rather than empathy from others (Gurtman, Martin, & Hintzman, 1990). Together, these findings suggest that the capacity for human empathy may be related to perceived closeness to or estrangement from God.

Persons low in assertiveness are more likely to view others as offended, distressed or angry (Josefowitz, 1989), or to perceive them as needy (Kivlighan & Angelone, 1992). They appear less able to secure help from others (Elliott & Gramling, 1990), experience lower trust and intimacy (Pilkington & Richardson, 1988), experience poorer marital relationships (Gotlib & Hooley, 1988), and are more likely to be involved in self-defeating relationships (Schill, 1991). Thus persons with low assertiveness may also tend to avoid intimacy with God, or may attempt it and fail, much as they do with their fellow humans.

Attachment theorists suggest that comfort, security, and safety are important elements in healthy attachment. Bowlby suggests that the experience of parental rejection is likely to result in perceiving others as unreliable, indifferent, and distant (Bowlby, as cited in Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994). Such perceptions may extend to God. Although Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) found that persons raised in nonreligious families who had avoidant attachments to their mothers were more religious than those whose mother-attachments were secure or anxious/ambivalent, it is not clear that becoming more religious involves feeling close to or loved by God.

Object relations theory suggests that personality develops from “early childhood relationships which produce internal self-other representations” (Bell, Billington, & Becker, 1986, p. 733). Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) has been shown to be related to attachment disorders (West, Keller, Links, & Patrick, 1993). Disturbed interpersonal relationships were the best predictor for discriminating BPD and Axis I disorders (Nurnberg, Raskin, Levine, Pollack,

Siegel, & Prince, 1991). Birkey and Ball (1988), Justice and Lambert (1986), and Buri and Mueller (1993) have shown parallels between relationships to parents and relationships with God, while Johnson and Eastburg (1992) reported conflicting findings. Together, these findings suggest that the quality of a person's relationship with parents--thought by object relations theorists to normally play a major role in object relations development--may contribute to closeness to or estrangement from God.

Guilt and forgiveness appear to be complex processes. Mauger reports that problems with forgiving self or others are associated with pathology (Mauger et al, 1992). Kaiser (1991) found guilt positively related to submission to God. Tangney (1991) discovered that other-oriented empathy was associated with a greater tendency to feel guilt, while self-oriented empathy was associated with a greater tendency to feel shame; she concluded that guilt was more adaptive interpersonally. Watson, Morris, and Hood (1989) reported that the experience of divine forgiveness transforms guilt from destructive to beneficial effects. Thus the way a person handles guilt and forgiveness issues appears to be important in the person's closeness with God.

Access to spiritual resources has been shown to be positively related to coping with distress, and to be associated with lower anxiety, confusion, depression, guilt, and anger/frustration; access to spiritual resources is also related to desire to be close with others and to offer help to others (Mauger, Blaydes, Carroll, Light, & Padgett, 1995).

Finally, there is some indication that gender is linked to closeness with God, though gender role ideology was not found to be related (Feltey and Poloma, 1991). Females have been found to be higher on empathy (Davis, 1983) and lower on loneliness (Upmanyu, Upmanyu, & Dhingra, 1992) than males; since both empathy and loneliness are related to interpersonal closeness, it is not clear whether gender, per se, effects closeness to others or to God.

The purpose of this study was to develop linear equations which predicted the subjective experience of estrangement from God among evangelical Christians. It was hypothesized that loneliness, empathy, assertiveness, attachment style, object relational characteristics, guilt, unforgiveness, access to spiritual resources, and selected demographic features would form a

significant linear model which could adequately predict the subjective experience of estrangement from God. It was believed that development of a list of signs for estrangement from God would prove helpful in identifying those clients for whom this issue is most likely to be a significant concern, thus potentially enhancing psychotherapy with such individuals.

Method

This study sought to predict estrangement from God as measured by Gaultiere's God Image Questionnaire (Gaultiere, 1989), which measures perceptions of God as not very loving, attentive, approachable, interested in, or involved in a person's daily life. The goal was to measure the person's subjective emotional experience of God rather than intellectual beliefs about God. A convenience sample of adult students and clients was used.

Participants

Participants included clients receiving mental health counseling from a Christian counseling agency in the vicinity of Portland, Oregon and students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate classes in Christian colleges and seminaries in the same geographical area. Those less than 18 years of age were excluded. A total of 156 individuals, including 115 females and 41 males, participated in the study. They ranged in age from 20 to 58 years ($M = 36.78$). Seventy were students, and 86 were clients. Ninety-one percent were Caucasian. Most were well educated (69.8% had earned at least a college degree) and had completed some formal religious training (64.7%). The majority said that "feeling close to God is very important to me" (82.7%), and claimed to have accepted Jesus Christ as savior and Lord (84.6%). Most attended church weekly as children (68.6%) and at least monthly now (79.5%). For religious affiliation, 71.% claimed to be Protestant, 4.5% Catholic, 12.2% indicated "Other", and 9.6% identified no religious affiliation. Forty three per cent were married, 34% single (many of these were students), and 16% divorced.

Instruments

Gaultiere's (1989) God Image Questionnaire (GIQ) served as the primary dependent measure. The Total God Image Scale (TGIS) score from the GIQ combines the Emotional God Image Scale and the Symbolic God Image Scale from the GIQ. The TGIS is viewed as a measure of a person's subjective experience of God, with low scores indicating estrangement from God, and high scores showing closeness to God. The Emotional God Image Scale (EGIS), which measures difficulty in experiencing God as good and loving, and the Symbolic God Image Scale (SGIS), which assesses difficulty in finding meaning in biblical pictures and symbols of God, served as additional criterion measures.

Instruments used as predictors of god image included the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults to measure chronic emotional loneliness (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993); the Interpersonal Reactivity Index to assess empathic ability, including empathic concern, fantasy, personal distress, and perspective taking (Davis, as cited in Davis, 1983); the Assertiveness Style Scale of the Interaction Styles Profile to measure assertiveness (Mauger, 1995); the Adult Attachment Types measure to distinguish anxious and avoidant attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987); the Bell Object Relations Inventory to assess object relational functioning, including alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence (Bell, Billington, & Becker, 1986); the Forgiveness of Others and Forgiveness of Self Scales to assess vengefulness and feelings of guilt--or extrapunitiveness and intrapunitiveness (Mauger et al, 1992); the Spiritual Resources subscale of the Brief Personal Survey to assess the capacity to draw strength, comfort, and meaning from religion in times of stress (Mauger, 1988); and a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire included standard demographic questions and questions about physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; adoption; parental divorces; perceived expression of love by father and mother; childhood religious attendance; the experience of harm by a church or religious activity, or by a Christian person; Christian profession; emotional closeness to God; and religious affiliation, education, and personal devotional practices.

Data Collection

Data were gathered during the summer of 1995. For the clinical sample, all therapists at the counseling agency were contacted and requested to invite clients who met the age criterion to participate. As an incentive for participation, results were provided to the therapist which could be used in the therapy process and given as feedback to the clients. Student participants were solicited by contacting professors and requesting the opportunity to present the study to their classes. At the professors' discretion, course credit was given for participation in some instances; in other classes volunteers received no credit.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted on a microcomputer using SPSS for Windows (Norusis, 1988). Initial data analyses included descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables to screen for possible multicollinearity. Stepwise regression was then used to assess the strength of the predictor variables in predicting estrangement from God as measured by TGIS, EGIS, and SGIS. Default settings were used, and significance was set at $p \leq .05$. Statistics computed included Multiple R , Multiple R squared, Adjusted R squared, Standard error of estimate, and Analyses of Variance to test significance of each predictive equation. Model assumptions were tested by examining for specification error, multicollinearity, measurement error, and homoscedasticity (Kachigan, 1982). Examination of the tests of assumptions indicated that assumptions were adequately met for all regression analyses.

Results

Comparison of the student and client groups showed that students scored higher on Total God Image as well as both Emotional and Symbolic God Image. Clients were more likely to report physical and sexual abuse, loneliness, egocentricity, guilt, alienation, personal distress, and egocentricity. Clients were less likely to be assertive; they also reported fewer spiritual resources (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Correlational data showed that 107 of the total 126 correlations between predictor variables and the TGIS, EGIS, and SGIS were significant. Most of the correlations between predictor variables and GIQ scales were moderate. Correlations ranged from near zero to $r = .64$. Only the three correlations between Spiritual Resources and the GIQ scales were greater than .60 three were in the .50 range, and the remaining bivariate correlations were less than .50.

The first regression analysis considered test scores, self report of having been harmed by a church, self report of having been harmed by a Christian person, and personal profession of Christian faith as predictors. Multiple linear regression indicated that estrangement from God, as indexed by TGIS scores on Gaultiere God Image Questionnaire, were predicted, in order of entry, by (scales are capitalized): personal Christian profession, Social Incompetence, Forgiveness of Others, self report of having been harmed by a Church, Empathic Concern, and Assertiveness (adjusted $R^2 = .45$, $F_{(6,149)} = 22.133$, $p \leq .0001$).

In the second regression the remaining demographic items were added. In this analysis Assertiveness and Social incompetence were not significant, but several devotional practices were included. The significant predictors, in order of entry, included (scales are capitalized): perceptions of limited access to Spiritual Resources; seldom engaging in the devotional practices of praying for others and forgiving others; the Forgiveness of Others scale; the devotional practice of waiting in silence before God; self reports of having been harmed by a church; low Empathic Concern; and absence of Christian profession (adjusted $R^2 = .65$, $F_{(8,147)} = 37.627$, $p < .0001$).

Further analyses examined predictors of EGIS scores and SGIS scores. When test scores, self report of having been harmed by a church, self report of having been harmed by a Christian person, and personal profession of Christian faith were examined as predictors, the resulting regression equation for predicting EGIS scores included the following variables, in order of entry (scales are capitalized): Forgiveness of Others, Social Incompetence, profession of Christian faith, self-report of having been harmed by the church, Empathic Concern, and Guilt (adjusted

$R^2 = .39$, $F_{(6,149)} = 17.627$, $p < .0001$). When all variables were included, EGIS Scores were predicted by the following variables, in order of entry (scales are capitalized): limited access to Spiritual Resources, absence of Forgiveness of Others, seldom engaging in the devotional practices of forgiveness and praying for others, current Emotional Loneliness, reports of having been harmed by a church, and being female (adjusted $R^2 = .59$, $F_{(7,148)} = 32.317$, $p < .0001$).

When test scores, self report of having been harmed by a church, self report of having been harmed by a Christian person, and personal profession of Christian faith were examined as predictors, the resulting regression equation for predicting SGIS scores included the following variables, in order of entry (scales are capitalized): personal profession of Christian faith, self report of having been harmed by a church, Assertiveness, and Empathic Concern (adjusted $R^2 = .41$, $F_{(4,151)} = 28.234$, $p < .0001$). When all variables were included in the analysis, SGIS scores were predicted by the following variables, in order of entry (scales are capitalized): absence of Christian profession, seldom praying for others, limited access to Spiritual Resources, seldom engaging in the devotional practices of forgiveness and waiting in silence before God, reports of having been harmed by a church, low Empathic Concern, and seldom engaging in Bible reading (adjusted $R^2 = .58$, $F_{(8,147)} = 28.027$, $p < .0001$).

Several predictor variables entered into more than one of the six regression equations. Self-report of harm by a church was the single variable which entered all regression equations. Self-reported personal Christian profession and Empathic Concern entered five of the six regression equations. The Forgiveness of Others scale entered four regressions. The Access to Spiritual Resources scale, and the devotional practices of forgiveness of others and prayer for others each entered three of the six regressions. The Assertiveness and Social Incompetence scales each entered two regression equations. The Guilt and State Emotional Loneliness scales, Bible reading, and gender each entered one regression equation. Table 2 summarizes these results.

 Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The present sample is unusual in combining students and clients, especially since there are significant differences between the two subsamples, as might be expected. However, it was believed that inclusion of the client sample is important to increase the range of variability on the predictor and dependent measures so that results would not suffer from the weakening effects of attenuated range. Because of the modest correlations between predictor and criterion variables, it was clear that no single variable can adequately predict estrangement from God as measured by the GIQ scales. The strong predictor equations produced in the study may be attributed in part to the strategy employed of using a diverse sample a variety of measures. One unanticipated complication is that gender and client status tended to occur together, and the analysis did not correct for this. However, gender proved to be a minor predictor of estrangement from God; it entered only one regression. Thus the failure to control for gender appears to be a minor concern.

Six significant regression equations were produced. The adjusted R squared statistics accounted for from 42% to 67% of the variance in predicting the individual's experience of God as measured by the GIQ--three equations accounted for at least 60% of the variance on criterion variables. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that a personal relationship with God, making use of spiritual resources, and engaging in spiritual disciplines foster a positive sense of God, and that the experience of abuse, harm by the church, absence of assertiveness, poor empathic capacity, and low tolerance for the emotions of others predict negative images of God. Further, the results are strong enough that they account for a significant proportion of the variance in estrangement from God. Thus they may have practical utility.

An interesting finding is that harm by a church was a significant predictor in all regressions, yet harm by individual Christians did not significantly predict their experience of God. This suggests that participants were better able to reconcile themselves to individual acts by Christians than to those perceived as perpetrated by a church or Christian organization. Since

institutions are represented by people, it appears that actions carried out in the context of religious offices are much more powerful in affecting persons' emotional experiences of God. While clinical observations and popular reports had suggested that these variables were important to estrangement from God, no prior research had confirmed them as predictors.

Although guilt has become a factor of increasing concern in the literature (Aden & Benner, 1989; Meek, Albright, & McMinn, 1995), the present results suggest that guilt may not play an important role in the subjective experience of estrangement from God. This finding is somewhat surprising, and suggests that perhaps guilt has been over-emphasized, while institutional harm by churches or religious organizations has been overlooked. Forgiveness is the counterpart to guilt, however, and the Forgiveness of Others scale entered four of the six regression equations, while the devotional practice of forgiveness entered three equations.

Apart from the development of the GIQ and the couple of studies which have employed it, no distinction has been made in the research literature between the emotional experience of alienation from God and beliefs about God. Yet clinical observations have suggested an important distinction. These data support such a distinction. They also suggest key factors which may account for the difference between the experience of God and beliefs about God, most notably, the experience of having been harmed by a church or religious organization.

The present data do not shed light on whether Catholics or other Christian groups may also experience a separation between beliefs about God and experiences of God. Likewise, they do not address whether similar results may be found in other theistic religions, such as Judaism and Islam. The experiences of persons in non-theistic religions may be quite distinct from those in Christian and theistic religions, but it is hypothesized that the experience of harm by religious officials may produce similar tensions between beliefs and experiences. For example, Rajneshees who experienced harm in the context of their religion may have had similar tensions between their beliefs and experiences. This may have been a factor in some persons leaving Rajneeshpuram prior to its demise.

One important limitation of the present study is that the use of a convenience sample limits the degree to which results may be generalized to other samples. Replication of these findings in another sample would significantly increase confidence in their generality. A second limitation is that other variables, perhaps even stronger predictors of estrangement from God, were not included in the data set. It is not thought that this is a serious concern since all hypothesized predictors of estrangement from God which could be identified in the literature were included in the present study. However, it is possible that important variables have nonetheless been overlooked; one example is the Christian discipline of service to others. A more significant concern is that the specific instruments used to operationalize the various predictors may be inadequate due to reliability or validity problems. This leaves open the possibility that some variables would appear more important if more adequately measured. For example, assertiveness may have proved a stronger predictor if the Interpersonal Behavior Survey (Mauger & Adkinson, 1987) had been used rather than the Assertiveness Style Scale. Also, the GIQ may not be an adequate measure of estrangement from God. Finally, the present study did not examine whether specific religious affiliation, frequency of attendance, formal religious education, frequency of personal devotions, or denominational group affected estrangement from God.

Implications for Counseling

It seems noteworthy that self-report of having been harmed by a church was a significant predictor in all six regression equations. This suggests that this single-item measure may be an important first clue regarding the possibility that an individual experiences estrangement from God. In applying these findings to clinical practice, we suggest that attention be directed first to this experience. Not surprisingly, personal profession of Christian faith proved to be a consistent predictor of estrangement from God, entering five of the six regression equations. Rejecting God is one of the ways in which estrangement from God is likely to be expressed. Among Christians this may take the form of doubts, concerns about whether they were ever saved, concerns about

loss of salvation, or fears of rejection by God. These may be held in tension with contrary doctrinal beliefs.

The next most important factors in terms of the number of regressions on which they loaded are empathic concern for others and forgiveness of others. Clients, especially Christians, may be encouraged to examine and change their practices in these areas. Emotional or other obstacles to forgiveness can be addressed. While scales were used to measure these variables for the present study, we believe it is likely that an experienced clinician can readily estimate the likelihood that these are factors for clients with who s/he has worked for any length of time. The self-report items on forgiveness of others and prayer for others also entered three of the regression equations, and may help to inform the clinician that a given client experiences alienation from God.

Summary

Taken together, the present findings provide strong preliminary support for the conclusion that alienation from God can be predicted from a relatively small number of demographic measures and scales. These factors include absence of a personal profession of Christian faith, self report of having been harmed by a church or religious organization, capacity for empathic concern for others, forgiveness of others, ability to obtain spiritual resources, and the practice of engaging in prayer for others. Clinicians should be especially responsive to clients who report having somehow been harmed by a church or religious organization.

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Table 1
 Comparison of Student and Client Samples for Significant Differences

Variable	Students	Clients	t-value
1. Demographic questions			
Age #	33.44	39.49	-3.95***
Education #	6.11	5.16	5.58***
Emotional Abuse #	1.40	1.85	-6.11***
Gender #	1.40	1.15	3.52***
Harmed by Church #	2.14	3.07	-3.53***
Harmed by Person #	2.13	3.63	-5.50***
Physical Abuse #	1.21	1.50	-3.80***
Religious Education #	1.81	1.51	4.23***
Sexual Abuse #	1.19	1.48	-3.96***
2. Objective Test Score Variables			
Assertiveness	13.66	9.99	4.36***
Chronic Emotional Loneliness	26.40	43.00	-7.42***
Forgiveness of Others	12.51	11.50	2.40*
Guilt #	2.26	4.27	-6.01***
Social Incompetence #	-.15	.56	-5.31***
Spiritual Resources #	7.37	6.38	4.12***
State Emotional Loneliness #	27.87	41.34	-6.10***

Table Continues

Table 1--Continued

Comparison of Client and Student Samples for Significant Differences

Variable	Students	Clients	t-value
3. Criterion Variables--God Image Questionnaire			
Emotional God Image Score	57.07	47.80	4.08***
Symbolic God Image Score	50.67	45.56	2.05*
Total God Image Score	107.74	93.36	3.36***

$N = 156$; $n = 70$ students; $n = 86$ clients.

Significance: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Pound sign (#) denotes unequal variance.

Table 2

Significant Predictor Variables Entered in the Regression Equations

Criterion	<u>TGIS¹</u>		<u>EGIS¹</u>		<u>SGIS¹</u>	
	Test ²	All	Test ²	All	Test ²	All
Predictors Included						
Test Scores						
Empathic Concern	*	*	*		*	*
Forgiveness of Others	*	*	*	*		
Spiritual Resources		*		*		*
Assertiveness	*				*	
Social Incompetence	*		*			
Guilt			*			
State Emotional Loneliness				*		
Demographic Variables						
Harmed by church	*	*	*	*	*	*
Christian profession	**	*	*		*	*
Forgiveness of others		*		*		*
Prayer for others		*		*		*
Silence before God	*				*	
Bible Reading					*	
Gender			*			
Proportion of variance explained						
in multiple R ² :	47%	67%	42%	60%	43%	60%

1. TGIS = Total God Image Score, EGIS = Emotional God Image Score, SGIS = Symbolic God Image Score on Gaultiere God Image Scale.

2. Test variables + Christian profession + self-report of harm by a church + self report of harm by a Christian.

Notes

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2. Tests of significance indicated that students and clients differed significantly on all variables included in the study. These findings indicate that including members of both sub-samples increased the variability on all measures, and thus likely increased the strength of all the main findings. Significant differences were also found between males and females on several measures, but these are likely due to the predominance of females in the client sample and the higher levels of problems expressed by clients.

Revisions suggestions

1. Case studies and anecdotal data suggest that spiritual abuse is a major concern in clinical contexts (VanVonderen & Johnson, 1991). However, this literature provides little data which identify the specific causal factors in alienation from God.

2. Little distinction has been made in most of the research literature between emotional experience of alienation from God and beliefs about God. Yet clinical observations suggest an important distinction. These data support such a distinction. They also suggest key factors which may account for the difference.

3. The present data do not shed light on whether Catholics or other Christian groups may also experience a separation between beliefs about God and experiences of God, whether similar results may be found in other theistic religions which are not Christian, such as Judaism and Islam. The experiences of persons in non-theistic religions may be quite distinct from those in Christian and theistic religions, but it may be hypothesized that the experience of harm by religious officials may produce similar tensions between beliefs and experiences. For example, Rajneshees who experienced harm in the context of their religion may have had similar tensions between their beliefs and experiences. This may have been a factor in some persons leaving Rajneeshpuram.

4. The present study did not examine whether specific religious affiliation, frequency of attendance, formal religious education, frequency of personal devotions, or denominational group affected estrangement from God.