

**Research Proposal Using Interpretive Phenomenological Methodology: A Study of  
Cognitive Dissonance Experienced by Junior Year Theology/Religion Students Who Have  
a Strong Theological Foundation but Feel Distant from God**

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### Abstract

■ This qualitative study explores the experiences of third year college students whose attachment style to God shifted from a safe and secure attachment when they first entered college to an anxious or distant attachment by their junior year. This phenomenon is often triggered by one's faith being challenged by others who do not hold similar beliefs. Through semi-structured interviews and using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher seeks to understand the reasons for this change in attachment style and how participants make sense of their experiences. The study will focus on how religion, cognitive dissonance, and theological understanding influence one's interpretation of that shift and what it means about their relationship with God. The goal of this research is to provide insights into the understanding of God attachment in relation to religious deconstruction. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on attachment theory and provide support and comfort for those who have experienced a similar change in their relationship with God.

*Keywords:* attachment, God attachment, anxious, distant, safe, secure, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, religion

### **Introduction**

Faith and religion influence how people grasp their relationship with God and they are integral to the functioning of every human being. These factors often serve as sources of comfort, peace, and purpose in people's lives, and they cannot be separated from the human experience. In recent years, however, religiosity and how one views their relationship with God has led to a perspective shift where everything a person believes about God should be questioned and deconstructed. This can be especially true for young Christians who have been taught to believe something their whole lives only to then transition into a college setting and have those beliefs about God and religion questioned to see if they truly believe it themselves. For those who felt secure and safe in their relationship with God now face a dilemma where they ask themselves, "How close of a relationship do I really have with God?" This can lead them to have feelings of guilt, shame, and uncertainty about their attachment to God which indicates having an insecure or anxious relationship with Him. In this paper, I seek to "understand the details of how individuals make sense of the change they notice in their attachment to God and how they make sense of that experience (Smith et al., 2009)."

Deconstruction has been a part of every Christian's journey at one point in their life or another. It is part of the Christian experience. One of the facets that has not been addressed from a qualitative perspective has been how this affects people's God attachment styles. I want to address what the process looks like for junior year college students who had a secure attachment style in their first year but currently have an anxious attachment style. What changed from year one to year three that altered their attachment style?

The phenomenon I want to explore is the cognitive dissonance experienced by theology/religion students in their junior year who have a strong theological understanding of who Jesus is but currently feel distant or disconnected from Him. ♥

I want to explore what led to the anxious feelings experienced from the cognitive dissonance from having a sound, theological understanding of Jesus but not feeling close to Him. Specifically, I want to understand their experiences of cognitive dissonance from having a strong theological foundation and understanding of who Jesus is but not *feeling close to Him*.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore and understand the meaning college participants from a Christian university assigned to the changes in their attachment style from safe and secure to distant and anxious in their relationship with God.

### **Goal of the study**

The goal of this study is to make sense of the participants' experiences and "making sense of the participants making sense of an experience" (Smith et al., 2009). Christians who experience deconstruction often go through a stage of meaning-making from the cognitive dissonance experienced from feeling anxious about their relationship with God even though they have a strong understanding of who God is. Having gone through my own personal experience of ambivalence in my relationship with God, I wanted to understand how other Christians have experienced this. Because I had such a strong theology growing up, I felt it would be important for the population I address to also have a strong theological foundation. Students in a theology/religion program would be the best fit for this study because it will provide a characteristic that is necessary to determine how they feel in their relationship with God by their junior year at a Christian university.

### **The Problem**

The problems this study seeks to address what causes the changes in one's attachment style from secure to anxious from their freshman to junior year at a Christian university. If a Christian has a strong theological understanding of who God is and feel close to Him when they first enter college, what led to them having an anxious attachment style now that they are in their junior year of college? Did their theological understanding falter when challenged by other Christians? Did they experience a traumatic event that made them question their faith and thus influenced how they attached to God moving forward? What took place within those three years (freshman year to junior year) that moved them towards having an anxious attachment style to God? By examining the causes of this change, the study can provide insights as to what factors influence their God attachment style and moves it from an safe and secure to an anxious and distant attachment style. ♥

### **The Importance of the Study**

This research is important because attachment style is an aspect of life that people understand due to its impact on their relationships with God and overall well-being. Additionally, it is important because many Christians feel alone when they experience this change in their attachment style through their college experience. Understanding the reasons behind the shift from safe and secure to anxious and distant can have significant spiritual implications in how one perceives their relationship with God. The benefits of conducting a qualitative study like this would be knowing and understanding that others experience this change may bring a sense of comfort and understanding instead of shame and condemnation (citation). It may also help them understand their relationship with God as not only being one of knowing him through building a strong theology, but also that they can experience his presence

by feeling close to Him in different ways. Often, Christians may have many conflicting thoughts and experiences that they feel ashamed or uncomfortable with sharing but knowing that other Christians who share similar experiences in how their attachment to God changed may prove to be helpful their personal walk with Christ.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Attachment theory has been a long-time studied area when it comes to why we relate to others in the way we do. The same patterns people display in their relationships can often be reflected in their relationship with God. There are various factors that contribute to this. This often includes individual experiences with religious faith and deconstruction (Simmons & Minster, 2012). Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) posit that individual's attachment styles are connected to what they believe and how they behave. They further state that people with different attachment styles also display their fluctuating relationship with religion. Simmons (1998) identified that people who have secure attachment styles also tend to have a deeper faith in their beliefs about God. Thus, one's experiences with religion can consequently influence their attachment style and can explain the possible reasons for transitioning from an anxious to an avoidant attachment. How different faith traditions perceive the role of God in their lives should also be taken into consideration when exploring attachment style (Granqvist, 2020). Reviewing these correlations inform us on how faith and deconstruction affect individuals' God attachments. ♥

### **Literature Length Note**

The qualitative research model used for this study will be the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This is a qualitative research approach that delves into the intricacies of the human experience (Miller et al., 2018). The IPA seeks to explore the

experiential process for the individual while also maintaining a commitment to a psychological foundation (Smith & Fieldsand, 2021). Essentially, IPA seeks to understand the lived experiences of people and the meaning they assign to those experiences. The goal is to reflect their individual narratives in a manner that communicates authenticity and accuracy. The role of the researcher is delineated from the participant's story, however there is a delicate balance necessary to know how much to engage with the participant's story while also remaining objective in accurately representing the participant's lived experience.

IPA also researches smaller standardized sample sizes which helps with being able to obtain the detailed information from each person's lived experiences. Because the topic is on how a person's attachment to God changes within a certain timespan, IPA made sense to use because it tends to focus on existential concerns that involve human matters around identity, self, and lived experiences. Because patterns and themes are important when using IPA, the semi-structured interviews provide extended periods of time with the participants so the researcher can closely examine the details of each participant's experiences.

As a whole, IPA provides an approach that seeks to understand the lived human experience and expound on the deeper meaning behind the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors displayed by the participants throughout the study.

### **Researcher Identity**

My personal experiences with my attachment to God inform my genuine interest as to why many young Christians who enter college experience a change in their attachment style. Having experienced a change in my own attachment style after entering my Master's program in counseling led me to question if others experienced the same dilemma. For myself, I felt very secure in my relationship with God before entering my program but soon found myself

questioning if what I believed was what I believed or was it beliefs that I held on to because of my parents and home church. I noticed that I moved from a secure attachment style to an anxious attachment style within the next few years. Much of that change was due to my beliefs being challenged by other believers who had different backgrounds and denominations than myself and that was an experience I was not accustomed to. I moved to an anxious attachment style because I started to question whether what I believed about God and my relationship with Him was false since it looked different to others who would describe themselves as secure in their relationship with God. In my work with college students, I noticed the same scenario and beliefs.

With the advent of deconstruction in Christian circles for millennials and Gen Z and my recent years of experience in working with college students, I found that many college students question and reassess their relationship with God after entering college. Because I work at a Christian university, I wanted to understand the experiences they had in college that moved them from a perceived secure attachment to God to an anxious one after a couple of years in college. Because meaning is often attributed to these changes, I wanted to understand what that change in their attachment style meant to them and what it said about their relationship with God. I remember how impactful and meaningful it was for me to go through that questioning phase in my anxious attachment to God, so I would want to be an encouragement to those who have experienced the same.

### **Research Methods**

IPA is appropriate for this research study because it will explicitly focus on *how* rather than *what* of the phenomenon for this study (Smith et al., 2009). How do junior year theology/religion students cope with the cognitive dissonance of having a strong theological understanding of who God is but currently feel distant from Him? This study explores in detail



the cognitive dissonance experienced by students in an undergraduate religious studies program at a Christian university and seeks to understand why students who felt safe and secure in their relationship with God before starting college are now feeling anxious and distant. Specifically, the researcher seeks to understand what led to this change in their attachment to God.

### **Research Design**

The development of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is that of an experiential qualitative approach grounded in health psychology, but also focuses on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). By using IPA, the researcher can examine how individuals make sense of their experiences. IPA places focus on the participants' making sense of this full experience (Smith et al., 2009). This study involves exploring specific cases within this phenomenon and will bring attention to the layers of what that cognitive dissonance meant to them and their relationship with God. By doing so, the study aims to provide rich insights into the factors contributing to each participant's current feelings of distance and anxiety in their relationship with God.

The application of IPA will capture the participants' lived experiences in detail. This qualitative approach delves into the intricacies of people's experiences to understand the different layers of complexity in the experience being reported. Due to the significant details it records, the methodology of gathering the data can help uncover and describe how individuals process making sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Research Relationships**

According to Larkin and Thompson (2011), semi-structured interviews are the most common means of collecting data for all phenomenological approaches, but with interpretive analysis, the researcher may use theoretical framework and person of the researcher to

focus the inquiry and make decisions about research process (e.g., sample, participants, research questions). Smith et al. (2010)

### **Setting and Participant Selection**

Participants for the study will be undergraduate students who are currently enrolled in a religious studies program—either religion or theology—and they must be at least in their third year. The specificity of them being in a religious studies program is essential because it is more likely that they would have grown up in the church and are safe to assume they would have a more secure attachment style. Furthermore, them being in their third year would indicate they would have had enough time for them to experience a “spiritual crisis” or a “deconstruction” of their faith. It would allow me to measure and evaluate what changed in their relationship with God from the start of their academic journey.

To be considered for the study, the first criteria would be that they described their relationship with God as “feeling secure and/or close to Him” at the time they started college. This will be a key factor that will be evaluated in the study. Secondly, they will have to be at least in their third year of their religious studies program to allow for enough time for deconstruction of their faith to happen. Thirdly, they will need to have been enrolled in a religious studies major (religion or theology) at the time they began their studies. Lastly, the student will need to report that they are currently feeling distant or anxious in their relationship with God. The goal is to have at least 6 participants and at most 10 to have strong validity for a qualitative study.

Participants will be acquired through email invitations which are sent out by the School or Religion’s department to all their residential students via Canvas. The email will include the guidelines to participate in the study along with the goals of the study. Participants will be sent to

a web address where they can complete the application if they see themselves as meeting the criteria mentioned above. All communication will be clear between the researcher and the research participants to avoid any conflicting information.

### **Data Collection**

According to Larkin and Thompson (2011), semi-structured interviews are the most common means of collecting data for all phenomenological approaches, but with interpretive analysis, the researcher may use theoretical framework and person of the researcher to focus the inquiry and make decisions about research process (e.g., sample, participants, research questions).

In the IPA design for collecting data, Larkin and Thompson (2011) indicate that an IPA interview “is not about collecting facts, it is about exploring meanings” (p. 104). They suggest using semi-structured one-on-one interviews which are also the most commonly used forms of data collection. They add that the researcher must take “great care to engage with participants on terms that are amenable and meaningful to them” (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, pp. 114-115) and to be careful when doing case study analysis, triangulation of data collection, and having potentially compromising forms of data collection (i.e., diaries, groups, etc.). The role of the researcher is to be as neutral as possible and simply allow for the interviewee to share their story (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). As mentioned earlier, they will seek to explore the meanings behind their experiences.

The one-on-one interview method will be important because the researcher can include body language, tone of voice, and other factors to consider when exploring for the meaning. It will allow for more richness in the narrative of their experiences. The difficulty will be selecting a few out of the many potential participants since the undergraduate religious studies program is

vast. However, I believe the initial filtering process where the students have to include that they felt close to God and were safe and secure in their relationship with Him when they entered college and also be currently in a state of distress where they feel distant or anxious in their relationship with Him will lower the number of participants significantly. Larkin and Thompson (2011) state that IPA studies require small sample sizes to gain more insightful analysis of copious amounts of data. However, they also understand that the numbers may “vary according to the aims, level and context of the research” (p. 104).

### **Data Analysis**

Smith et al. (2009) provides the foundation for how the data from these interviews will be analyzed. The analytic process using IPA begins with close, line-by-line analysis of what the participant claims to have experienced. For this study, I would be analyzing every line that references them starting to feel distant and anxious in their relationship with God, keeping in mind that the ones who are being interviewed have confirmed that they entered college with a secure attachment to God. As I would analyze each line, I would explore what it meant to them when they started to feel anxious in their attachment to God and reference any lines that communicated this sentiment.

It is likely that I would start to see emerging themes in the meanings drawn from their experiences of having felt close to God but now feeling ambivalent and distant from Him. Smith et al. (2009) suggest emphasizing the convergence and divergence, and commonalities and distinctions within the identified themes. There would then be a ‘dialogue’ about what it might mean for these students to be experiencing this dissonance within their context.

The next development would be illustrating how the various themes are connected. For example, one of the themes that may come from this research is how those who now feel anxious

in their relationship with God, led to them “deconstructing their faith”. This deconstruction, however, could lead to another theme of how it also strengthened their faith since it forced them to explore their values and belief systems at a deeper level.

Furthermore, it is critical to have a supervisor or collaborator audit the initial interpretations to evaluate the coherence and plausibility of those interpretations. Once audited, the narrative can be developed so the reader can gain detailed insight into the meaning created by the participant. Moving through the various themes, seeing how they are connected, reviewing how aligned the interpretation is with those themes, and even visually aiding the reader to better understand the journey towards finalized meaning can take for different participants.

Lastly, a key to this process is the reflection of the researcher himself. He will want to record his perceptions, conceptions, and processes to reflect on how each participant’s story may be similar or different to his. This reflexive journal can also safeguard the research by reminding the researcher that even though others have experienced similar emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, the meaning created from those experiences can be vastly different. This can serve as a reminder for him not to interject his own lived experiences onto others who experienced the same dilemma he did. With each of these various factors, trustworthiness may also be impacted so it is important to address it in the next section.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a serious consideration taken by the researcher to confirm the credibility of findings in a qualitative study. One critical component that speaks to the trustworthiness of this type of study is the long-term involvement in the research setting (Shenton, 2004). In this study, the long-term involvement would not be necessary since the assessment would be made on their current attachment to God. Specifically, only those who

*currently* feel distant or anxious in their relationship with God would be used for this study. The involvement of the researcher with the participants would be in gathering their attachment to God history from the time they entered college. The researcher would also need to confirm that these participants initially believed to have a safe and secure attachment to God before entering college. Throughout this investigative journey, the research develops an understanding of their context as he builds rapport with them (Morse et al., 2002). The researcher can also gain meaningful insights from their narratives that will develop a rich and comprehensive layout of how their God attachment changed. The more the researcher immerses himself in this context, the more rich and diverse perspectives he will be able to capture from each of the participants which would ultimately strengthen the trustworthiness of the study (Morse et al., 2002).

However, the length of time may not be applicable for this study. ▼

Another factor to consider for the trustworthiness of this study is respondent validation (Shenton, 2004). The feedback from participants is critical to ensure that the data collected from the interviews are described as accurate and authentic by them. The goal is to represent their voices accurately and also give them an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or misinterpretations by the researcher. Furthermore, the participants can make any additional contributions that reinforce the credibility of the research. ▼

Shenton (2004) also lists that searching for discrepancies or negative cases within the data adds to the trustworthiness of the research. Seeking out information that challenges emerging themes in the study guards against confirmation bias and self-fulfilling prophecies (Shenton, 2004). Examining these discrepancies strengthens the researcher's findings because it provides a more balanced view on the topic. Humility is an essential characteristic the researcher

must hold to do this, and as Christians, we can hopefully learn to do so with more ease than others.

Lastly, Guba (1981) explains that triangulation contributes to the reliability of qualitative research because it integrates multiple data sources, methods, and/or researchers. This allows for the research to corroborate his findings. It is unlikely for the study to be completely unique, and thus, there should be some overlapping sources and methods that were employed to explore similar phenomenon. Using triangulation ultimately provides a multi-faceted exploration and more accurate representation of the topic.


### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this qualitative study will explore what the experiences for third year college students is like when they see their attachment styles shift from safe and secure to distant and anxious. The use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was critical because it allowed for semi-structured interviews, which allows for a deeper exploration of the shift and meaning-making process is for each individuals' experience. The process of outlining the internal world of each of the participants to understand why their attachments to God shifted from secure and safe to anxious and distant provided significant insights that I think can be encouraging for others who may review this study.

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