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Conversion and Attachment Insecurity Among Orthodox Jews

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BRIEF REPORT

Conversion and Attachment Insecurity Among Orthodox Jews

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Radical conversion, which entails a sweeping transformation of existing meaning systems, is often precipitated by emotional distress. Nevertheless, although many individuals turn toward religion when distressed, few undertake total and radical conversions. Previous research suggests that insecurely attached individuals—who resemble James's disillusioned, doubting, and divided sick souls—may be particularly prone to radical conversions. Thus, the present research examined insecure parental attachment history and convert status among 122 Orthodox and 31 non-Orthodox Jews, hypothesizing that converts to and from Orthodox Judaism, who undertake an all-encompassing transformation of beliefs, behaviors, values, and life's purpose, would report greater insecurity in parental attachment history than nonconverts. Results indicate that converts report greater maternal and paternal insecurity, as compared to both nonconverts and those with intra-Orthodox religious change. Thus, further research examining insecure attachment, and associated religious stressors and doubts, may uncover some of the individual differences underlying radical conversions.

Radical conversion, which entails a sweeping transformation of beliefs, strivings, and ultimate purpose (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999), has long interested psychologists of religion. A substantial body of research indicates that these changes are often precipitated by emotional stress (e.g., Galanter, 1979; James, 1902; Starbuck, 1899; Ullman, 1982; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998) challenging the intellectual and emotional foundations of an existent meaning system (Paloutzian, 2005). Nevertheless, although many individuals turn toward religion when distressed (Pargament, 1997), few undertake the profound transformation inherent in a total and radical conversion. In fact, James (1902) presupposed the radical convert's possession of a "sick soul," close to the emotional pain-threshold, concerned with personal inadequacy

and worthlessness, and confronted with the insecurity of human existence. Correspondingly, research indicates that some individuals—such as those with low self-esteem (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998) or difficult family backgrounds (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Ullman, 1982)—are particularly prone to radical conversions. These findings, placed within Paloutzian's (2005) meaning-systems analysis, suggest that some individuals with hitherto unmet emotional needs may be uniquely predisposed to transform their beliefs, values, and even life purpose when confronted by stress and doubt.

JAMES'S SICK SOUL AND INSECURE ATTACHMENT

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), presents a compelling theoretical and empirical configuration that strongly recalls James's description of the sick soul. This theory suggests that humans possess an innate behavioral-system, which when activated by distress or danger seeks support from powerful attachment figures (e.g., parents). The success or failure of these early distress-regulating interactions is understood to evolve a fairly stable set of beliefs and attitudes called internal working models. Accordingly, attachment research (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) indicates that positive interactions with available and responsive attachment figures produces a working model that includes effective distress management strategies, and optimistic views of the self and others. On the other hand, individuals with unavailable, unreliable, or even punitive attachment figures develop an insecure style characterized by ineffective interpersonal skills (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, chap. 9 & 10), emotional disregulation (chap. 7), and deflated self-worth and competence (chap. 6). Furthermore, insecure attachment correlates with poor self-regulation, goal construal, and identity formation (chap. 8). Taken in aggregate, this empirical depiction of the insecurely attached strongly echoes James's disillusioned, doubting, and divided sick soul.

Consistent with these ideas, attachment and religion theorists demonstrate (see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004, for a review) that sudden converts report greater insecurity in parental relationships, compared to those without dramatic religious transformations. Moreover, their research suggests that these radical conversions entail a shift to a meaning system containing a compensatory secure relationship with a loving and caring God. Similarly, insecure individuals from religious backgrounds appear predisposed to "convert" away from parentally socialized religiosity (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008). Accordingly, insecure attachment may represent a global predisposing factor, which lowers the "pain-threshold" for stress and doubt and increases the likelihood of religious transformation. The present research examined parental attachment history as a predisposing factor for conversion to and from Orthodox Judaism.

ORTHODOX JUDAISM AND CONVERSION

Orthodox Judaism—a broad categorization of various subgroups with differing cultures and religious emphases—is premised on unconditional acceptance of the *Torah*'s (Jewish Bible) divine origination and adherence to its many commandments as interpreted by the *Talmud* (5th-century compendium; Huppert, Siev, & Kushner, 2007). These detailed religious laws, which include dietary restrictions, numerous rituals and prayers, and prescriptions for family

life, infuse daily life with religious responsibilities and significance. In addition, Orthodox Judaism espouses a comprehensive meaning system (Maimonides, 1990), focusing on belief in a monotheistic God, acceptance of his commandants, and eventual messianic redemption. Furthermore, many Orthodox Jews limit their contact with the secular world (Huppert et al., 2007) forming cloistered communities centered on this religious ideology. As a result, conversion to and from all-encompassing Orthodox religiosity entails a transformation of beliefs, behaviors, values, and life's purpose; an absolute break with the religious past; and thus a total or radical conversion (Paloutzian, 2005).

Although conversion of non-Jews to Orthodox Judaism is discouraged, many Orthodox groups actively seek non-Orthodox *Baalei Teshuva* (or "returnees" to traditional observance; Danzger, 1989), hence referred to as converts in the psychological sense. Consistent with James's (1902) ideas and previous research (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004), previous reports link emotional and social difficulties with these conversions. For example, Kaufman (1991) mentioned that most of the 150 convert women she interviewed expressed concern over marital and family bonds and spoke freely of their poor heterosexual relationships. In addition, both Kaufman (1991) and Danzger (1989) found that a severe disruption of personal relationships (e.g., death of a parent or loss of romantic attachment) often precipitates this religious seeking. Moreover, Yehuda, Friedman, Rosenbaum, Labinsky, and Schmeidler (2007) reported an almost twofold proportion of convert women reporting sexual abuse, particularly by acquaintances and family, as compared to non-convert Orthodox Jewish women. Furthermore, Ullman's (1982) influential finding that family difficulties are associated with conversion used a sample of which 25% was Orthodox [Jewish]. Similarly, although few reports are available, leaving Orthodox Judaism appears associated with ineffective parenting (Brownstein, 2008) and childhood rejection, unhappiness, or abuse (Margolese, 2005).

Accordingly, the current research compared perceived parental attachment history among converts to and from Orthodox Judaism versus nonconvert Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, hypothesizing that converts would report greater insecurity than nonconverts, regardless of the direction of their religious transformation. In contrast, altering subgroups within Orthodox Judaism ("intra-Orthodox conversion"), which does not entail a radical transformation, was expected to be unrelated to attachment history.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred fifty-three participants were recruited from Internet blogs, forums, and news outlets with primarily Orthodox Jewish audiences. Demographics for the resulting sample, which was collected without restriction or stratification, are presented in Table 1. Current religious affiliation included four Orthodox groups: Chassidic ($n = 7$), Yeshivish (39), Modern (67), Lubavitch (9), and non-Orthodox (31).

Measures

Conversion. Participants reported both their current ("I define myself as") and parental ("When I grew up my parents were") religious affiliation. Options were limited to four principal

TABLE 1
Age, Gender, and Attachment Insecurity by Convert Category

Convert Category	n	Age		Gender		Attachment Insecurity	
		M	SD	Male	Female	M	SD
Orthodox							
Convert	49	43.17	11.72	27	22	29.45$_b$	7.84
Nonconvert	48	35.75	13.08	21	25	23.71$_a$	9.02
Intra-Orthodox	25	35.92	14.17	19	6	24.12$_a$	10.03
Non-Orthodox							
Convert	13	40.54	30.27	4	3	31.08$_b$	4.87
Nonconvert	18	43.67	14.18	6	12	23.78$_a$	8.72

Note.   Means with differing subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$ (post hoc Least Significant Difference).

Orthodox groups—"Chassidic," "Yeshivish," "Modern Orthodox," "Lubavitch"—and "non-Orthodox." Each participant was then assigned to one of five conversion categories based on self-reported discrepancies between their current and parental affiliations. Orthodox participants were assigned either Orthodox convert (non-Orthodox parents), intra-Orthodox convert (Orthodox parents from a different subgroup) or Orthodox nonconvert (identical parents). Similarly, non-Orthodox participants were assigned either non-Orthodox convert (Orthodox parents) or non-Orthodox nonconvert (non-Orthodox parents).

Attachment history.   Like previously published studies (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004), a measure consisting of four attachment-history paragraphs tapping previously described attachment styles (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) was used. Reflecting attachment's dimensionality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), participants rated these paragraphs on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 6 (*strongly disagree*). They read:

Secure: She (He) was generally loving and understanding. She (He) was good at knowing when to be helpful and when to let me do things on my own.

Dismissing: She (He) was generally fine but not very affectionate. She (He) taught me at an early age to be independent and self-sufficient.

Preoccupied: She (He) was generally loving but not as understanding as I would have liked. She (He) loved me, but didn't always show it in the best way.

Fearful: She (He) was generally unpredictable and sometimes even hurtful. She (He) had her (his) own problems and they sometimes got in the way of her (his) ability to take care of me.

Participants responded to each prototype twice, once referring to mother and once to father, resulting in an internally consistent, eight-item attachment scale ($\alpha = .71$). Responses to all eight items were summed (reverse scoring the secure prototypes) to form a single global measure of attachment insecurity. This was done to avoid the risk of error inherent in multiple comparisons, and because hypotheses related to the severity of attachment insecurity, rather than the type. Furthermore, previous research indicates that mother and father similarly influence

conversion (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004) and that this measure is internally consistent (Granqvist, 2005).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a Web site and, after giving their informed consent, were directed to a survey form containing both the attachment and religious affiliation measures. These items preceded a larger survey partially analyzed in a previous paper (Pirutinsky, 2009).

RESULTS

As hypothesized, attachment history differed significantly among convert groups, $F(4, 148) = 4.59$, $p = .002$. Post hoc analyses using the least significant difference procedure showed that Orthodox converts and non-Orthodox converts reported significantly more insecurity than did Orthodox non-converts, non-Orthodox nonconverts, and intra-Orthodox converts (Table 1). No other pairwise comparison was significant. Moreover, radical converts ($M = 29.79$, $SD = 7.32$)—regardless of the direction of their religious transformation—reported greater insecurity in parental attachment history, as compared to both nonconverts and intra-orthodox converts ($M = 23.84$, $SD = 9.15$), $t(151) = 4.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.7$.

An additional analysis of variance comparing the attachment history of converts within each Orthodox subgroup was not significant, $F(3, 45) = .06$, $p = .98$, suggesting that conversion to more traditional and isolated groups is unrelated to severity of attachment insecurity. Furthermore, radical converts reported both greater maternal insecurity ($M = 13.15$, $SD = 5.05$), $t(151) = 3.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.63$, and greater paternal insecurity ($M = 13.79$, $SD = 4.01$), $t(151) = 2.69$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.44$, as compared to the maternal ($M = 10.12$, $SD = 4.48$) and paternal ($M = 11.78$, $SD = 4.87$) insecurity of all others.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous research (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004), converts to and from Orthodox Judaism reported greater insecurity in maternal and paternal attachment history, as compared to both nonconverts (Orthodox and non-Orthodox) and those with intra-Orthodox religious change. These results suggest individuals with insecure attachment may be particularly prone to radical conversion, perhaps because—like James's (1902) sick soul—they have lower emotional "pain-thresholds," insecurities about self-worth and competence, and poorly socialized "divided" meaning-systems (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Accordingly, future research relating attachment insecurity more directly to the sick soul, as well as to specific religious stressors, doubts, and changes, may further substantiate these ideas. For example, research premised on previously suggested differences between collectivist oriented Judaism and individualistic Protestantism (Cohen & Hill, 2007) may substantiate anecdotal reports (Danzger, 1989; Kaufman, 1991), indicating that Orthodox conversions more strongly involve transformation to a religious communality rather than a personal relationship with God.

These findings, however, are limited by use of an Internet sample, which may have self-selected for interest in religious research and may exclude more religiously traditional Orthodox Jews, who generally do not access the Internet (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005). Furthermore, like previous attachment and religion research (see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004, for a discussion), the self-report retrospective measure of attachment used, may have been influenced by later religious change and consequent disidentification from parents. Nevertheless, recent research, using an established interview measure of current attachment (Adult Attachment Interview; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996), similarly found that insecurity is related to radical religious change (Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007).

In conclusion, a greater proportion of radical converts perceiving their attachment histories as insecure suggests that attachment insecurity may predispose some individuals to radical conversions. Taken within Paloutzian's (2005) meaning-systems analysis, these findings indicate the need for further research examining pre- and postconversion attachment insecurity, as well as associated stressors, doubts, and changes, which may begin to uncover some of the individual differences underlying radical conversions.

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