DOES GOD HEAL?

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF

YOUTH'S EXPERIENCE OF GOD DURING

THEIR SUFFERING

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study was to explore youth's experience of God during periods of suffering in their life. Through a qualitative inquiry, eight participants were invited to share their experience of the phenomenon. The study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach, and data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The analysis elucidated a number of themes illustrating the effects of a relationship with God during challenging times. The major theme of this study highlights God as an attachment figure who provides safety and calmness in troubled times. Through the relationship with God, participants found their purpose in life whilst coping and experienced a sense of fulfilment. Another theme focuses on the discrepancy between the church and God, and how the church influences moral development. The theme regarding the significance of being part of a community concluded several benefits on youths' mental wellbeing when coping such as feeling cared for and loved. The final theme considered the need of having human guidance, for instance a spiritual director, when attempting to understand God. All of these themes have implications for the counselling profession especially in the area of youth. A number of recommendations were suggested, such as the need for further research on local youth's disclosure in counselling, about how their relationship with God as a potential coping strategy in difficult times, and more training in spirituality for trainee counsellors. It is suggested that the spiritual aspect in clients' life could be considered more in the initial assessment. A main limitation of this study is that the participants that offered to be part of this research, are all Christian and Maltese except for one participant.Thus, this study might offer a limited picture of youth in Malta, considering the increase in international youth residing on this island. This study is important for the counselling profession, as it provides information to counsellors about different experiences of individuals, together with their coping strategies, especially that of youth.

Keywords: relationship with God, suffering, spirituality, youth, counselling

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DEDICATION

To the Late Ingrid Cutajar Engerer, who let God heal her soul

during her battle with cancer.

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Introduction

"Għalija, Alla huwa ħabib li għandu *WhatsApp*; il-ħin kollu online u toqgħod tkellmu, u jarak, u jisimgħek, u jirrijektja għal dak li tgħidlu. U li He is always there. Għalija, illum il-ġurnata huwa ħabib li naqsam miegħu il-ferħ, il-ħsibijiet tad-daħk li jkolli f'moħħi, in-niket, id-dwejjaq, l-*anxiety* li jkolli, problemi tal-familja, problemi personali ta' relazzjoni, kollox!" (Mark).

"For me God is a friend who uses *WhatsApp;* he is constantly online, you can chat with him, and he will see you and hear you and reacts to what you tell him. He is always there. Nowadays I see God as a friend with whom I share joy, funny thoughts, sorrow, sadness, anxiety, family problems, relationship problems, everything!" (Mark).

As from the beginning of life, human beings have an innate desire to develop an attachment with the caregiver in order to survive (Bowlby, 1982). Infants long for a bond with their primary caregivers and separation from them creates distress (Ainsworth, 1985). When a child reaches the stage of adolescence, the dependency on the parental attachment figures decreases and shifts to other people such as romantic interests and peers (Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010). The shift from primary caregivers to multiple attachment figures predisposes youth to seek comfort in an attachment with God, especially in stressful situations (Kohn-Wood, Hammond, Haynes , Ferguson, & Jackson, 2012). This hypothesis is not generalised worldwide, however in a religious country like Malta, it may be more prominent (Gellel & Sultana, 2008). One might wonder if such hypothesis would be true in other cultures where religion does not take part. The cognitive development happening during early to late adolescence may enable youth to establish the metacognitive and representational capacity to develop a relationship with God, whilst seeing him

in a differentiated way rather than the representation given in childhood (Moretti & Peled, 2004). These cognitive changes enable youth to develop deeper understanding of a personal relationship with God (Goeke-Morey, Taylor, Merrilees, Shirlow, & Cummings, 2014). In addition, the desire to form significant relationships is crucial at this stage. Erikson (1968) states that forming intimate relationships is a major task amongst youth. Should intimacy not be achieved, loneliness may be experienced (Erikson, 1968). When someone is faced with hardships yet manages to overcome them by turning the situation into a lesson, he or she is called resilient (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). One of the many factors that contribute to resiliency is spirituality, since it enables people to find meaning in stressful situations (De la Rosa et al., 2016). Spirituality is sometimes embedded in a religious framework, in which people experience a sense of community sharing of a common relationship with a transcendent deity (Van Hook, 2013). For some youth, a relationship with God is constitued of an intimate relationship and this provides them with mental wellbeing benefits (Salmanian, et al., 2015). At this stage, changes in religious development are salient (Dell & Fowler, 2010). This phase is described as synthetic conventional faith, and it entails youth forming stronger beliefs and representations about God (Dell & Fowler, 2010).

Against this background, the current research aims to investigate youth's perceptions of how their relationship with God affected their management of past life situations. This was carried out through in-depth interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with the intention of giving voice to young people who desired to share how they overcame hardships in their lives. It is hoped that findings emerging from this study will provide a better

understanding of this phenomenon, together with implications for the counselling profession.

Locating Myself in the Research Study

At six years of age, I clearly remember my Grade 1 teacher telling our class that Jesus was our father and we should talk to him the way we would talk to our parents. Growing up with neglectful parents, I had no one to talk to, so I took the teacher's advice literally. Unknowingly, this was the start of an attachment bond with God. I felt safe knowing he was always there for me to listen and make me feel better about myself. During my undergraduate course in psychology, I started learning that other children who had similar family backgrounds to mine might experience adverse repercussions. This made me wonder. How did I manage to survive and cope well in the circumstances? After learning about Kirkpatrick and Shaver's research (1990), I understood that having a secure attachment with God provided me with similar benefits to what a secure attachment with a parent might have given me. When I was nineteen years old, I went through another, very difficult situation, and I believe that the attachment with God had great impact on the way I coped. After breaking up from the first romantic relationship I had experienced, I ended up losing all of my friends too. This was a time in which I experienced embarrassment of not being able to hold any type of relationship and felt lonely. This life experience encouraged me to explore whether, and to what extent, other people's attachment with God affected the way they managed difficult life situations.

The first time that I could articulate what I felt in relation to God was when I started learning about the attachment theory. Whilst assessing myself

during one of the lectures, I realised that I had an anxious attachment with my caregivers, possibly due to their absence in my childhood. When I reflected on how I coped despite the difficult childhood, I understood that I always turned to God in any given situation. I could associate the relationship I have with God with what Bowlby proposed about experiencing a secure attachment. Bowlby (1982) explained that, if a person has a secure attachment, they would be able to cope with life better, because they know that their attachment figure is available and responsive. My life experience filled me with hope, as it may indicate that the benefits of having a secure attachment may not necessarily be acquired from biological parents or caregivers, but it could also be provided by God or some other entity. For the reasons mentioned, my interpretative framework is attachment theory, and I will therefore be looking at the data through the attachment lens.

My experience led to deeper curiosity around others' experiences of attachment with God, particularly in difficult times. To my surprise, I found a vast amount of literature regarding the topic. This helped normalise my feelings and validate my experience. A particular researcher stood out, as he focused his research on attachment with God: Kirkpatrick (1999) applied the four attachments styles explained by Ainsworth (1985) to experiences with God. He argues that the relationship with God could be described as an attachment bond (Kirkpatrick, 1999). The similarities between attachment with a caregiver and attachment with God is mostly seen in the proximity behaviour (Beck, 2006). Believers often desire to be close to God, and in times of stress God is seen as a haven of safety (Beck, 2006). This is similar to what Bowlby (1982) stated, that when people are faced with suffering, their attachment system is

activated and they seek a safe haven. Birgegard and Granqvist (2004), concluded that when faced with emotional crisis, individuals sought a relationship with God. Besides safe haven, other attachment characteristics such as stronger and wiser, and maintaining proximity, are also associated with God.

The Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework takes into account Carl Rogers' basic assumption that people are trustworthy and are able of self-growth (Rogers, 1942). According to Carl Rogers, people have the potential to understand themselves and resolve their own problems through their involvement in a therapeutic relationship (Corey, 2013). I thus hope, both for others and myself, that people are capable of change as long as they have at least one significant relationship. I tend to adopt a non-deterministic approach, as I believe that people are in control of their lives and are able to change their situation to reach fulfilment (Corey, 2013). Maslow's theory comes to mind. In the hierarchy of needs, Abraham Maslow explained the five levels of needs. These constitute physiological needs, the need for safety and security, the need for love and belonging, the need for esteem, and the need to actualise the self (Boeree, 2006). Maslow explains that people need to have their physiological and safety needs met in order to move to self-actualisation (Boeree, 2006). In my work with youth, I have noticed that many youngsters experience a great desire to feel safe and achieve some sort of stability. However, stability and security may be jeopardised if they are going through particular difficult situations. For believers, a reliable and safe source of security could be having an attachment with God (Birgegard and Granqvist, 2004). It was found that many Christians

cope with stress by believing that God is by their side holding their hand, and this comforts them just as a secure attachment with a caregiver would (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Hence, my ideology is that youth may turn to God as an attachment figure, in order to cope better in challenging situations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the research topic was introduced and a brief overview of how I position myself in the study was given. An overview of the chapters will now be outlined. This dissertation consists of six chapters. Following the introduction, the inspiration and conceptual framework for the study, the second chapter discusses existing research about the topic under investigation, whilst the third chapter explains the research design used. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the study and the fifth chapter discusses the findings in light of existing literature. The final chapter outlines the limitations of the study together with recommendations for counselling practice, training and future research.

Literature Review

The literature presented in this chapter is closely linked to the purpose of this study, which seeks to investigate youth's experiences of the impact of attachment with God on their management of past life situations. What follows is an overview of the nature of attachment throughout our lifespan, including different attachment styles, attachment with God and a presentation of the correspondence and compensation hypotheses. Research on resilience and spirituality is outlined, concluding the discussion on potential implications on counselling. The most significant search terms used in the literature search were 'attachment with God' and 'attachment with God impacting youth'. Other search terms included 'attachment and young adults', 'relationship with God', 'earned security with God', 'waiting for God to solve problems' and 'passive religious coping'. When I searched the terms 'finding God in times of distress', 'cross and suffering in adolescents' and 'spiritual harm', I did not find any relevant information for my study.

The Nature of Attachment

Attachment theory was developed upon the idea that humans have an innate psychobiological system that drives humans to seek proximity to significant others to protect themselves in times of stress (Bowlby, 1982). Bowlby (1973) advocated that the extent to which an infant desires to be close to the attachment figures depends on early interactions with the caregivers. The relationships created out of these interactions influence the cognitive-affective representations, or 'internal working models of self and relationship partners' (Bowlby, 1973). For the affectional bond to grow, the attachment figure must provide a safe haven in times of threat and serve as a secure base. This enables the individual to explore the environment, which in turn paves the

way for the development of cognitive and physical skills (Bowlby, 1982). An infant's brain is wired to desire this kind of bond with primary caregivers and resist separation from their attachment figure in new or stressful situations (Ainsworth, 1985). The attachment relationship serves as a container for the infant, helping them to regulate their emotions and gain a sense of security (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010). A child is securely attached when their caregivers are emotionally attuned with them and the infant has full confidence that their caregiver will provide security and comfort (Granqvist et al., 2010). Attunement happens when the baby feels understood, and this usually occurs on physical levels of interaction between the caregiver and the baby (Van Der Kolk, 2014). This enables them to distinguish between situations where protection may be required or not (Granqvist et al., 2010). In contrast, infants who have experienced inconsistent or unreliable caregivers are likely to develop insecure attachment and consequently find it hard to discriminate safe from unsafe situations (Van Der Kolk, 2014) For this reason, insecurely attached children tend to either minimise proximity seeking, referred to as 'avoidant attachment', or maximise the proximity, which is called 'anxious attachment' (Ainsworth, 1985). In severe cases where the attachment figure creates fear in the child, such as in cases of abuse, insecure attachment strategies may be disorganised and may lead to psychopathology later on in life (Main, 1991).

A person's attachment system is reactivated whenever they encounter challenging situations such as divorce or death of a loved one, leading them to seek attachment figures that provide a 'safe haven' (Bowlby, 1969). Thus, the attachment system influences the course of life of every individual.

Furthermore, the attachment system influences the formation of personality; through the nature of sensitivity and responses the individual received in their past, their personality is formed through the formation of internal working models about self and others (Cassibba, et al., 2014). Therefore, caregivers' characteristics highly influence the development of the type of attachment, and most importantly, the personality of the infant (Ainsworth, 1985). Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) suggest that the attachment system may be activated whenever the individual encounters situations perceived as dangerous. The three specific situations that activate the attachment system are: illness or injury, separation or threat of separation from attachment figures, and frightening or alarming environmental events (Bowlby, 1969). Serious chronic diseases and life-threatening illnesses are powerful attachment system triggers, even in adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As one grows older, one has the possibility to seek support from other sources other than parents, such as romantic partners or God (Cassibba, et al., 2014). Both the romantic bond and the relationship with God meet the criteria established for an attachment relationship (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008). This will be discussed later on in this chapter.

From the Cradle to the Grave

This study seeks to highlight experiences undergone by youth. To this end, I will explore the biological, psychological and social changes that this age group may experience. Even though the definition of youth may change with circumstances such as demographics, economy and socio-cultural positions, any age from 15 to 35 years may be considered to fall within the category of youth (UNESCO, 2017). According to Erikson (1968), this stage is concerned

with the task of achieving intimacy versus isolation. This stage is characterised by a great desire to connect and a great fear of being lonely (Erikson, 1968). The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a vulnerable period, where youth start taking important decisions towards independence and new adult roles (Rosenberg, 2016). This period is characterised by significant neurological, cognitive and socio-psychological development (Moretti & Peled, 2004). Due to the vast changes occurring in youth, there is a high incidence of onset or exacerbation of mental illnesses, substance abuse, risk-taking behaviour, antisocial and delinquent behaviour and school dropouts (Moretti & Peled, 2004).

During early youth, a substantial neurological transformation occurs, as dopamine and serotonin production changes drastically and reaches stabilisation at age sixteen (Takeuchi, Matsushita, Sakai, & Kawano, 2000). These neurological changes might lead to an increase in anhedonia, irritability and risk-taking behaviour (Spear, 2000). Moreover, significant cognitive development occurs, especially with abstract thought and problem solving. An important change that happens from early to late adolescence is the development of metacognitive and representational capacity, which may lead to an understanding as to why youths develop a relationship with God (Sternberg & Berg, 1985). Young people become more able to comprehend multiple perspectives of the world, leading them to look at others and themselves in a differentiated way rather than the representations they had in childhood (Moretti & Peled, 2004). During early adolescence, youth tend to view the world in black or white terms, which presents them with contradictory aspects of the self (Bresnick , Bouchey , Whitesell , & Harter, 1997). However, in later

adolescence, the young person becomes capable of integrating these conflicting aspects into a coherent sense of self (Bresnick et al., 1997).

Dell and Fowler (2010) stated that changes in religious development are noticeable in adolescence to emerging adulthood. This stage is named synthetic conventional faith and it consists of cognitive changes that enable youth to develop an in-depth understanding of a personal relationship with God (Goeke-Morey, Taylor, Merrilees, Shirlow, & Cummings, 2014). Youth start forming strong beliefs and representations about God, attributing with him personal qualities such as acceptance, love and support (Dell & Fowler, 2010). If the young adult experienced a childhood characterised by neglect or emotional or physical abuse, representations of God may include betrayal and shame (Dell & Fowler, 2010). From an attachment perspective, these representations may be linked to a development of an attachment with God, who may potentially serve as a secure base in times of distress (Goeke-Morey et al., 2014). Research seems to indicate that having a secure attachment with God has significant benefits for an adolescent navigating in the path of self-discovery, independence and adult relationships (Goeke-Morey et al., 2014). The neurophysiological development occurring during this stage is in line with the evolvement of the human concept on religion and spirituality. Thus, there is an intimate link between spirituality and physical development (Newberg & Newberg, 2006).

With biological change, youth enter a new social-psychological phase, where they desire autonomy, leading to a decrease in dependence on parental attachment figures (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). During this phase, there is a struggle between finding one's own voice by opposing their attachment figures

and requiring their comfort, thus potentially creating tremendous stress in an adolescent (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). The Important People Interview was developed to assess the adolescents' attachment hierarchies in order to understand if any changes occur in the preferences of multiple attachment figures (Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010). Rosenthal and Kobak (2010) confirmed that the hierarchy in the attachment system changes in adolescence. Whilst parental figures tend to remain in the attachment system, multiple attachment figures such as peers and romantic partners also become important in an adolescent's life. Their positioning highly depends on particular events faced by the individual at particular stages in their life (Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010). In non-threatening situations, youth tend to turn to their peers for support; yet, this does not mean that these relationships become full attachment relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Friendships tend to serve proximity-seeking and safe-haven functions; however, they lack in separation distress and lasting commitment (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). Thus, under conditions of danger, parents are still used as attachment figures even in young adulthood (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Youth may also seek comfort from other sources, such as religious coping methods, to alleviate psychological distress. Understanding the role of religious coping during the developmental period from adolescence to adulthood is significant, as it implies emerging behaviour that may become a life-long pattern of coping (Kohn-Wood, Hammond, Haynes , Ferguson, & Jackson, 2012).

Attachment with God

In this research, the notion of having a relationship with God that may have emerged from childhood will be taken. Attachment with God can be seen

as a spiritual relationship that emerges from early parent-child relationships

(Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, Hill, & Delaney, 2009). The idea of having an

attachment with God has its origins from Freud's statement that God represents

an exalted father figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Indeed, in most Christian

traditions, God has a close connotation to the idea of a secure attachment

figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Lee Kirkpatrick (1998) compared the core

aspects of religious experience with an attachment framework. According to

Kaufman (1981), God represents an ideal attachment figure since God is

perceived as a reliable and secure parent who is always available to his

children when in need. The spiritual relationship with God meets the criteria for

a meaningful attachment relationship, since it entails seeking and maintaining

proximity to God in times of distress, experiencing God as a safe haven and

secure base, having a response to separation and loss and perceiving God as

stronger and wiser (Granqvist et al., 2010). Literature highlighting the

relationship between parental attachment and believers' relationship with God

will now be presented.

Seeking and Maintaining Proximity to God

As stated earlier, an individual seeks proximity to their attachment figure

for safety (Bowlby, 1969). Since God is often presented as being omnipresent,

believers might feel they can be close to God whenever they need (Granqvist

et al., 2010). Nonetheless, people have always sought greater closeness to

God through building churches, enabling them to visit 'God's Home' (Granqvist

et al., 2010). One way individuals feel they are attaining closeness to God is

through prayer, which has been found to be the most practiced form of

religiosity (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008). One also has to consider the effects

of separation from God as the attachment figure and the emotional discomfort experienced with such loss (Granqvist et al., 2010). Since attachment with God is not a physical phenomenon, this criterion becomes hard to establish. However, in many Christian testimonies, separation from God is described as darkness filled with agony (Mother Teresa, 2007). The feeling of being abandoned by God is illustrated as being lost in hell (St. John of the Cross, 1990). Thus, one might conclude that believers have a great desire to be attached to the exalted father figure, since separateness from God is experienced as mentally torturous (Granqvist et al., 2010).

God as a Safe Haven

Bowlby (1982) states that, in times of distress, people's attachment system is activated; thus, they seek a safe haven. Likewise, people tend to turn to God in their suffering and the worse the situation is, the more likely they are to do so (Pargament, 1997). Indeed, one could suggest that prayer may function as analogue to attachment behaviour (Kirkpatrick, 2005). It stands to reason that, in alarming events, people may turn to God and even experience sudden religious conversions (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Religious conversions happen when an individual totally surrenders his or her problems in God's hands (Dewhurst & Beard, 2003). Successful coping in situations of loss of a loved one is correlated to an increase in prayer and devotion to God (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Indeed, an experiment carried out by Birgegard and Granqvist (2004) concluded that theistic believers seek to be closer to God when they are faced with emotional crisis. Statements that strengthen the idea that God is perceived as a safe haven are the following: 'a feeling that God gives a sense of comfort

and warmth', 'God helps in times of distress', 'anxiety felt if there was no God' and 'God gives a feeling of strength and security' (Kumari & Pirta, 2009).

God as Stronger and Wiser

Bowlby (1982) pointed out that children often regard attachment figures, as being stronger and wiser. This enables them to explore their environment knowing they have a safe haven to go back to (Bowlby, 1982). Moreover, children use their attachment figures as consultants who have better knowledge of puzzling situations in their world (Bowlby, 1982). Several titles attributed to God, such as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, suggest that believers perceive God as wiser and are therefore more likely to entrust their difficulties to him (Granqvist et al., 2010). During recovery from mental illnesses, patients who perceived God as a strong protector recovered quicker than those who are not devout (Prout, Cecero, & Dragatsic, 2012). Those who are religiously involved seem to have better mental health (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). Additionally, those who trust their life in God and have a secure attachment to him, seem to have a buffer against undesirable stressful life events (Ellison, Bradshaw, Kuyel, & Marcum, 2011). Having God's presence in one's life may lead believers to address any challenging life situations, since they feel that they are being protected by someone greater than them (Ellison et al., 2011). Indeed the perceived protection from an exalted father figure seems to help individuals achieve greater life satisfaction, as they feel loved by an omnipotent figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). Those who experience a divine relationship with God also seem to experience less loneliness. This is significant since loneliness may be perceived as an absence of an adequate attachment figure in one's life (Granqvist et al., 2010). Literature reviewed for

the purpose of this study seems to overwhelmingly state the positive effects of having a relationship with God. Nevertheless, some negative effects were noted. These include: feeling critisised, self-blame and anxiety (Behere, Das, Yadav, & Behere, 2013), all of which will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Attachment Styles to God

After the development of Hazan and Shaver's (1987) self-report questionnaire, one could measure adolescent and adult romantic attachment orientations as being secure, anxious or avoidant. Different variations of this questionnaire have been proposed such as the Attachment God Inventory (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Two dimensions were drawn out in the Attachment God Inventory: avoidance of intimacy and anxiety about abandonment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Avoiding intimacy with God involves difficulty around depending on God due to a need for self-reliance and unwillingness to be emotionally intimate (Beck & McDonald, 2004). On the other hand, anxious attachments involve themes of angry protest about God's perceived lack of affection, fear of potential abandonment by God, jealousy over God's seemingly differential intimacy with others, preoccupation with, or worry, concerning one's relationship with God and anxiety over one's lovability in God's eyes (Beck & McDonald, 2004). Since the model is dimensional, individuals may vascillate from anxiety to abandonment throughout their life (Beck & McDonald, 2004). This model may be integrated into the fourfold classification of secure, preoccupied, fearful, or avoidant attachment (Bartholomew, 1990). While secure attachment consists of a perception that God is warm, responsive, protective and respectful of one's own liberty, avoidant attachment involves the idea that God is distant and has little or no

interest in the individual (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). In fact, a person with an avoidant attachment to God believes that God is not interested in their life (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Anxious-ambivalent attachment includes a perception of an inconsistent God; thus, there may be times where the individual feels loved by him and there might be other occasions where the individual feels God does not care about their needs (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Knowing the different attachment styles to God can guide inquiry when understanding the connection between one's type of attachment to God and the perceived effect on the participants' lives.

Figure 1. Fourfold classification Bartholomew (1990)

Implications of the Kind of Attachment with God

The kind of attachment one has with God may engender wider implications. Secure attachment to God is associated with an increased ability to forgive and live a more satisfying life (Salmanian, et al., 2015). Individuals who perceive God as compassionate have the ability to be compassionate

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towards themselves (Homan, 2014). Moreover, those who are securely attached to God seem to have positive self-worth and are more able to express their emotions without the fear of abandonment or criticism, since they are confident of God's love and approval (Homan, 2014). Having a secure attachment with God is linked to a fighting spirit, that is, the willingness to do things that are difficult (Cassibba, et al., 2014). Indeed, this could be beneficial in times of ill health or adverse events (Cassibba, et al., 2014). On the other hand, adolescents with a history of addiction, criminality, and mental conditions among their families seem to have an avoidant attachment to God, thus influencing the inability to forgive others (Salmanian, et al., 2015). Individuals with avoidant attachment to God seem to repress or deny emotions in order to maintain self-reliance, whilst anxiously attached individuals tend to experience self-criticism, rumination and worry (Cassidy, 1994). Overall, being insecurely attached to God is linked to hopelessness and anxious preoccupation, which could hinder fighting spirit in distressful situations (Cassibba, et al., 2014). Having an insecure attachment to God has also been associated with greater incidence of neuroticism (Kent, 2017).

Compensation or Correspondence Hypothesis

An interesting debate has developed over the years about whether an attachment with God is a source of compensation for a deficiency in caregiving, or if a relationship with God mirrors a person's caregiver style (correspondence) (Beck & McDonald, 2004). The correspondence hypothesis proposes that early relationships provide a template for future relationships, including the relationship with God (Granqvist, 1998). Therefore, the nature of people's religiousness could be linked to childhood relationships. Thus, securely

attached children would become adults with a higher inclination to develop a secure attachment with God than adults with insecure childhood attachments (Granqvist, 1998). This statement is rooted in Bowlby's (1969) idea of the internal working models, whereby those with a secure attachment perceive others as loving and reliable, whilst those with insecure attachments are apprehensive about the trustworthiness of others, in this case God. Moreover, it is in line with Rizzuto's (1991) notion that God is perceived subjectively according to the individual's early object representations, influencing religious meaning attributed to events, behaviours and psychic acts. On the other hand, the compensation hypothesis proposes that individuals with an insecure attachment style are in greater need of a compensatory attachment figure, which in this case would be God (Granqvist, 1998). Insecure attached adults would thus become more religious and would experience a particularly significant relationship with a personal God (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). This hypothesis is based on Ainsworth's (1985) concept of attachment substitutes, where persons who do not have secure attachments seek comfort and security in others.

Initial research (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990) on these hypotheses supported the compensation hypothesis. Individuals who had an avoidant attachment style in their childhood seemed to experience significant religious conversions compared to the secure or ambivalent counterpart (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Moreover, insecure individuals experienced an increase in their religious beliefs in their adulthood when compared to securely attached people (Granqvist, 1998). Additionally, those who experienced insecure and avoidant attachments in their childhood were found to be more religious, expressed

through frequent church attendance, together with a belief and experience of a personal relationship with God (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). These conclusions drawn from the cross-sectional studies (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Granqvist, 1998) were later confirmed through a longitudinal study carried out by Kirkpatrick (1997), which found that women with an ambivalent attachment style were more likely to experience conversion over a four-year time span compared to securely attached women. It is interesting to note that literature does not seem to point out the relationship with God of those who had an abusive relationship with their parents. The correspondence hypothesis has also received support, whereby individuals who are securely attached with their parental figure were more likely to believe in and experience a personal God (Granqvist, 1998). Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) found that participants who had a secure adult attachment were more likely to experience a secure attachment with God, as well as greater religious commitment, when contrasted with insecure participants. This contradicts Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992)'s finding which suggests that ambivalent respondents seem to have experienced a meaningful religious conversion.

In light of these seemingly contradictory findings, Kirkpatrick (1999) suggested an integration of the correspondence and compensation hypotheses, stating that each hypothesis could be seen as consistent with different aspects of attachment theory. Based on this concept, a revised version of the correspondence hypothesis was postulated. The revised model states that securely attached individuals correspond to their attachment figure's religiousness rather than to the secure attachment itself (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). This means that children having secure attachments are more likely to

be successfully socialised and adopt the caregiver's religious behaviours (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). This seems to bring to mind Bandura (1965) who, in his experiments, showed that children are more likely to imitate a nurturing and loving model. The compensation hypothesis was retained stating that, in the case of insecure attachment, God serves as a substitute attachment figure to maintain security (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). A perceived relationship with God may help the individual to regulate his or her emotions and minimise anxiety in distressing situations, just like a secure attachment with a caregiver would do (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). Hence, with this new concept in mind, religiousness may be understood as stemming from a socialisation experience in the case of secure attachment, whereas it might provide emotional regulation in the case of insecure attachment (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999).

A further development on the compensation hypothesis is the concept of earned security. Earned security refers to those adults who experienced difficult early relationships with parents but currently have a secure working model (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). The ability to develop earned security is based on whether insecure individuals are able to experience secure relationships with significant others who are different from the caregivers they experienced in their infancy (Shibue & Kasai, 2014). This unique relationship may also be a corrective experience for those who had insecure attachments whilst growing up (Kimbal, Boyatzis, Cook, Leonard, & Flanagan, 2013). The corrective experience can alter the internal working model of the individual, since the model engenders the possibility for revision in case of discrepancies between one's model and current experiences (George, 1996). Research has found that

secure attachment with a significant other provides strength to overcome challenging situations (Shibue & Kasai, 2014). Additionally, having a relationship with alternative support figures helps children overcome negative experiences with their parents (Saunders, Jacobvitz, Zaccagnino, Beverung , & Hazen, 2011). Indeed, research has found that individuals who were abused during their childhood and formed secure relationships with nurturing alternative figures were able to break the cycle of abuse and provide adequate care for their children (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988). In order to compensate for what was missing during childhood, the individual searches for security in a new attachment figure (Counted, 2016). Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002) have applied this notion to God, suggesting that he could be one of the alternative figures for people with attachment anxiety or avoidance. Youths who have emotionally lost their parents due to divorce or separation explained how having an attachment with God helped them to come out of a gangster lifestyle and start looking at life and at themselves positively (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

Resilience and Spirituality

A review of literature on this topic would be incomplete without reference to resilience. The word 'resilience' has roots in the Latin verb *resilire*, meaning to rebound, (Hesketh, Ivy, & Smith, 2014), referring to a process of adaptation when faced with adversity, tragedy, trauma and significant stresses (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). Resilience does not only refer to the ability to overcome adversities, but also to accepting life events, thus allowing for

adaptation (Grabbe, Nguy, & Higgins, 2012). It includes the ability to cope and turn hard situations into opportunities for learning (Grabbe et al., 2012). A resilient person has the following characteristics: inner strength, competence, flexibility and optimism (Wagnild, 2009). Other important qualities are having a sense of humour, taking responsibility for one's own emotional well-being, and finding meaning in difficult situations (Dreyer, 2015). The capacity to deal with hardship does not only depend on inner qualities. However, it also depends on external factors, which are referred to as protective psychosocial factors (Dreyer, 2015). These protective psychosocial factors include a supportive social network such as family, friends and community (Grabbe et al., 2012). Another significant factor that affects resilience is spirituality, since it provides the ability to understand and overcome stressful situations (Angell, Dennis, & Dumain, 1998).

Gnanaprakash (2013), asserted that spirituality refers to the aspect of life that gives meaning and direction to an individual. It is believed to connect human beings with the transcendent (Gnanaprakash, 2013). Spirituality is sometimes embedded in a religious framework, thus providing a sense of community that shares a relationship with a transcendent deity (Van Hook, 2013). It is important to highlight the differences between spirituality and religion. Some people consider themselves as spiritual but not religious, whilst others claim to be both religious and spiritual (Mizzi, 2017). Religion originates from the Latin word *religare*, meaning to bind together, which may also refer to an organising system of faith, including worship, traditions and rituals (Paragament, 1997). On the other hand, spirituality is derived from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning the breath that gives a sense of connection to oneself,

others and to something that is beyond us, such as God, universal energy or love (Knox, Catlin, Casper, & Schlosser, 2005). Religion and spirituality are not separate, as religion may allow space for the practice of spirituality. However, religion may also inhibit the expression of one's individual spirituality (Burkhardt, 1989). This study will not elaborate on the distinction between two constructs, as the aim is to understand how the relationship with God affects the individual.

Religion and spirituality enhance resilience as they provide ways of understanding suffering, thus rendering it bearable (Paragament, 1997). Moreover, spirituality helps individuals perceive the world as being safe, controllable and fair (De la Rosa, Barnett-Queen, Messick, & Gurrola, 2016). People have diverse coping strategies and one of the ways people deal with their problems is by praying (Gnanaprakash, 2013). Spiritual healing refers through recovery from adverse situations such as domestic violence through the restoration of a sense of meaning and empowerment (De la Rosa et al., 2016). Additionally, patients in different hospital settings who believed in an ultimate power seemed to recover quicker (Gnanaprakash, 2013). College students who valued the spiritual aspect in their life had better health outcomes when it came to processing decisions about risks that could negatively affect their health (Nelms, Hutchins, Hutchins, & Pursley, 2007). Spiritual people have also been found to possess the ability to cope with life stressors more easily and calmly (Gnanaprakash, 2013). Additionally, they tend to resolve problems by focusing on solving the problem and seeking social support (Krok, 2008).

Different Kinds of Religious Coping

Over the years, further findings have supported the notion that spirituality could be a potential resource in dealing with challenging circumstances (Van Hook, 2013). In the nationwide survey conducted in the United States after the tragedy of 11th September 2001, 90% of participants aged 19 years and older reported turning to prayer and religious or spiritual practice in order to cope (Schuster, et al., 2001). In another study, young people from a variety of ethnic groups shared how religion strengthened their family system when facing hardships, as it gave them a sense of hope (Walsh, 1999). In a study with women who had been sexually abused, participants reported that spirituality was an important tool for healing (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). However, it has to be stated that most participants reported being religious - this may have influenced their inclination to use religion and spirituality in their healing process (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). Women interviewed stated that their religion provided them with a supportive network of people. Moreover, religion assisted them in making meaning of their experience, freeing them from feeling guilty about the abuse (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). Overall, religion helped participants to feel worthy and have purpose, despite their experience of abuse (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). In another study, adults coping with HIV and AIDS felt supported and comforted through the relationship they had with God. This relationship gave them a sense of meaning in life and helped them to not fear death (Siegel & Schrimshaw, 2002). Pargament and Brandt (1998) suggest that religious coping may be effective because it offers responses to problems that humans are incapable of solving. Thus, it would appear that, when people are pushed beyond their limits, they may become aware of their

human vulnerability and find comfort in spiritual support (Van Hook, 2013). Spirituality can greatly contribute to the process of healing by giving one a sense of purpose in what is happening and connecting the individual to others (Van Hook, 2013). In summary, studies seem to show that spirituality can strengthen resilience by enhancing a sense of unity, hope, social support and sense of meaning (Van Hook, 2013).

On the other side of the coin, however, spirituality may also decrease resilience if it is linked to demoralising statements, such as 'I am unworthy and abandoned by God' (Van Hook, 2013). Spirituality may negatively affect the cognitive system when the person experiences guilt, shame, anxiety and depression due to enhanced self-criticism (Behere et al., 2013). When facing hardship, one may take a positive religious coping mechanism or else may adopt a negative coping mechanism. Behere, Das, Yadav and Behere (2013) explore two ways of dealing with stressful situations, naming them positive and negative religious ways. A positive religious way refers to individuals trying to learn a lesson from the stressful event, seeking help from clergy members and reflecting on how one's life is part of a larger spiritual force (Behere et al., 2013). A negative religious way is when a person passively waits for God to take control of the situation and looking at the stressor as a punishment from God or as a test from the devil to question the love for God (Behere et al., 2013). Passive religious coping may also include denial, avoidance and deferral and this type of coping is usually associated with negative mental health outcomes (Barber & Gold, 2012). Moreover, negative religious coping, such as feeling punished by God or interpersonal religious conflict, has been linked to poorer psychological adjustment in ill youth (Roehlkepartain, 2006). It

would seem, therefore, that studies which refer to usefulness of spirituality seem to include a sense of meaning making through the supportive relationship with God.

Hence, shifting responsibility to God in difficult situations has been found to be unhelpful (Kohn-Wood et al., 2012). Cancer patients who opt for passive religious deferral and focus only on pleading for a miracle from God tend to have higher levels of stress compared to those who have active religious coping mechanism (Pérez & Smith, 2015). Additionally, teenage participants who reported passive reliance on God for protection from HIV through praying to God not to give them HIV, was associated with negative outcomes (Puffer, Watt, Ogwang-Odhiambo, Sikkema, & Broverman, 2012). Negative religious coping also includes the feeling of abandonment by God, where an individual perceives that their life is not important enough for God to worry about him or her (Puffer et al., 2012). If an individual perceives God as being unpredictable and inconsistently supportive, she or he may experience loneliness, depression, and be less satisfied with their life (Kezdy, Martos, & Robu, 2013). Such findings seem to highlight an insecure attachment with God. One might therefore wonder about the extent to which a person's attachment style with God affects coping. When a person redefines the stressor as a punishment from God, they may think that they deserve the punishment because of their wrongdoing. Alternatively, if the stressor is explained as an act of the devil, they may blame the devil for putting them into that situation (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). These strategies are considered dysfunctional forms of religious coping and lead to greater distress, rather than providing comfort in hard times (Pargament et al., 2000). One might notice that the negative side of having an

attachment with God is not delved into extensively and this is due to the lack of research on such hypothesis.

Implications for Counselling

As counsellors, we are always encouraged to look at our clients' whole identity, including their race, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic status, religious and spiritual orientation (Daniels & Fitzpatrick, 2013). Moreover, all mental health professionals hope to work holistically with all elements of the client's cultural identity (American Psychological Association, 2003). For these reasons, having more knowledge about spiritual values will influence the way counsellors conceptualise and treat mental illness (American Psychological Association, 2003). Moreover, the connection of mental well-being and spirituality has been largely supported for several years (Koenig & Larson, 2001). In certain cultures, such as the Aboriginal communities, spiritual beliefs take over the therapeutic encounter (Daniels & Fitzpatrick, 2013). In fact, counsellors and clients focus all their energy on spiritual issues, since internal struggles are thought to have a spiritual origin (Daniels & Fitzpatrick, 2013). The ritual for healing includes sacred teachings, songs, dance and the use of natural herbs. This fosters inner balance between the natural and spiritual world (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2009). Curanderos, who are traditional healers among Latin Americans, folk healers in Asian cultures, and shamans in Australia, incorporate spirituality in the treatment of mental health issues (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999).

Since religiosity forms a central part of many clients' lives, more attention has recently been devoted to developing competence in this area (Hathaway,

2013). Counsellor sensitivity to the client's religious preferences will enhance

the client-therapist collaborative relationship, and encourages the client's

commitment to mental health support systems (McLeod, 2012). Unfortunately,

a lack of specialised training in religion and spirituality might lead to counsellors

being unable to integrate religious and spiritual interventions in their therapeutic

work (Jafari, 2016). Indeed, many counselling programmes do not offer training

in spirituality and religion, and, if offered, it is in the form of professional

seminars that are offered infrequently (Jafari, 2016). The fact that cultural

interchange is more common requires counsellors to be more open to other

healing practices (Sue & Sue, 2007). An evolving understanding of youth and

their spiritual beliefs and how this influences their coping mechanism calls for

counsellors to be knowledgeable on different spiritual realities, in order to be

competent in a wider range of cultural beliefs (Yeh, Borrero, & Shea, 2011).

Since spirituality is the process of meaning-making and youth is a period in life

marked with confusion about one's own future, it would be interesting to learn

more about the interplay between the two aspects (Yeh et al., 2011). This does

not imply that counsellors should start imposing the idea of spirituality onto

youth; however, gaining more knowledge will surely aid counsellors to become

skilled in a more holistic manner (Yeh et al., 2011).

Conclusion

In this chapter, several themes elicited from existing research were

discussed. These included the nature of attachment, attachment with God, the

correspondence and compensation hypothesis, resilience and spirituality and

different kinds of religious coping. Moreover, it was a good opportunity to

explore how this study might assist the counselling profession. Research found

provided me with deeper awareness about the topic under investigation,

leading to a potentially greater ability to critically analyse relevant issues. Due

to a limited word count, the literature review could not be presented in much

depth. However, the main points relevant to this study have been highlighted.

The next chapter will review the methodological process behind this

investigation.

Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used for this study together with the method and design used to conduct the research. Furthermore, it also incorporates a description of the collection and analysis of data obtained from the interviews. It includes the importance of ethical considerations such as confidentiality, informed consent and ethics. Finally, a reflection about reflexivity is presented.

Epistemological Position

The same phenomenon can be researched from different epistemological positions: positivism, empiricism, hypothetico-deductivism and social constructionism (Soini, Kronqvist, & Huber, 2011). Positivism focuses on producing objective knowledge which implies that the researcher studies the phenomenon from the outside without personal involvement (Collins, 2010). Empiricism implies that our senses are employed to produce knowledge; thus through observation, the researcher is able to construct theories (Willig, 2013). Hypothetico-deductivism is when the researcher looks for disconfirmation of the hypotheses. This stance relies on the fact that observation cannot produce theories (Tariq, 2015). The epistemological position that I took for this research is a social-constructionism stance. Social-constructionism implies that knowledge is constructed through interaction with others rather than being created and the same phenomenon can be defined in different ways (Andrews, 2012). The reason behind this choice is that this type of epistemological position places emphasis on identifying how individuals construct their social reality, by exploring its implications for their experiences and social practices (Willig, 2013). Therefore, this research focused on exploring various ways by

which the participants construct their reality of having an attachment with God whilst going through a challenging life situation.

Choosing a Qualitative Approach

The main research question is: How do youths experience the impact of God during their suffering? The main aim of this study was to explore the extent to which youths' attachment with God affected them whilst going through hard times in their past. My main objective was to understand if, and how, their relationship with God affected the participants' coping strategies. To facilitate and ensure the understanding of how the world is constructed for each participant, a qualitative approach was used (McLeod, 2001). I have been interested in learning about human behaviour for as long as I can remember. For this reason, a qualitative approach corresponds with my philosophical nature as it is concerned with the understanding of participants' perceptions and experience. On the other hand, had I taken a quantitative approach, I would have focused on discovering facts about social phenomena (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, given that the study assumes that reality is not fixed and I was interested in understanding how individuals make sense of having an attachment with God, rather than generalising the phenomenon, a qualitative inquiry was ideal (Willig, 2013).

Phenomenological Research

In order to provide a framework for planning, implementing and evaluating the research, the theoretical underpinnings for this study will be discussed (Carter & Little, 2007). IPA which is the qualitative research method used in this study, is influenced by phenomenology (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

This involves the close analysis of the phenomenon in order to understand the meaning of the individual's lived experience (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). As Finlay (2012) claims, phenomenology examines human experiences that are usually taken for granted. Thus, it focuses on seeing how things are for each individual through their experience (Finlay, 2012). There is a continuum between transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology (Finlay, 2013). The transcendental (or descriptive) approach that was developed by Edmond Husserl in the 1900s, attempts to bracket prior preconceptions and meanings in order to have a fresh look at the phenomenon that is being studied (Finlay, 2013). A descriptive phenomenology emphasises on the notion of 'epoché', meaning that the researcher should put aside his or her biases in order to let the phenomenon emerge freely (Finlay, 2013). Since I believe that my experience influences the researched phenomenon and, indeed, it could even enrich the study, a transcendental approach was not fitting for this study.

Instead, I opted for a hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology is based on Martin Heidegger's writings which focused on 'the mode of being human' (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology states that meaning is constructed in one's context (Finlay, 2017). Since I desired to get a deeper understanding of each individual's experience, keeping in mind that their context influences their meaning, a hermeneutic approach was ideal (Willig, 2013). My assumptions are in line with the hermeneutic approach, as it states that we cannot separate ourselves from the world (Willig, 2013). Therefore, in my study, I took into consideration the context and how this influences the way we interpret our reality.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology does not separate description from interpretation, since it argues that all descriptions have a form of interpretation (Kafle, 2011). In fact, before we try to understand a concept, we make preliminary assumptions about the meaning of we are trying to understand. For instance, before embarking on this study, I had my own assumption that attachment with God tends to facilitate coping in adverse life situations (Kafle, 2011). The process of understanding requires a circular movement from presumption to interpretation and back again, which is called a hermeneutic circle (Kafle, 2011). The researcher engaging in a hermeneutic phenomenological research needs to seek the essence of the participant's experience whilst also understanding how their being is influencing the particular phenomenon (Kafle, 2011). For this reason, my individuality as a researcher may have influenced the way the participants responded. For instance, the fact that I am female, a trainee counsellor and an active volunteer in a religious organisation, may have inclined the participants to respond to me in a particular way, according to their own perception of my identity. In addition, a double-hermeneutic takes place, as my own conceptions are required to interpret the participants' world. In other words, while the participants are trying to make sense of their world, as a researcher, I am also trying to understand the way the participants are making sense of their own (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Rationale for using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Since I desired to understand the meanings of significant experiences shared by the participants, an interpretive phenomenological analysis seemed

the most appropriate (Willig, 2013). In addition to phenomenology and hermeneutics, which have already been discussed, interpretative phenomenological analysis is highly influenced by the philosophical concept of idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Idiography focuses on offering insight into how an individual in a context makes sense of their given phenomenon (Smith, 2007). Moreover, idiography focuses on the particular rather than the universal (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). Grounded theory and narrative research have similar goals to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); thus I will explain why I chose IPA over the other two. IPA was chosen over narrative approach because I wanted to study the personal meanings and sense-making of having an attachment with God during life struggles, and explore similarities and differences with other people who share this experience. Thus, I would like to understand the nature of meaning through the participant's interpretation of phenomenon and my own interpretation of that (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). On the other hand, a narrative approach investigates how people construct meaning over time, and hence would focus on representing the people's stories as told by them (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Grounded theory is more focused on producing a theoretical claim and is better used to identify and clarify contextualised social processes that are related to the phenomena (Willig, 2013). In contrast, IPA focuses on understanding the nature of each individual's experience (Willig, 2013). For this reason, I could obtain a more detailed analysis of the participants' experiences through IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Like any other methodology, IPA has its limitations. One main limitation may be that the analysis account is an interpretation of one researcher.

However, this was debated by arguing that the research produced is a credible one, but not the only credible one (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, &Hendry, 2010). In other words, IPA does not seek to find one single truth; instead, it focuses on finding a coherent and legitimate account of individual experiences (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, &Hendry, 2010). The set of steps that are suggested in IPA may seem limiting for some. Nevertheless, it has been argued that the steps are open to adaptation especially by experienced IPA researchers (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, &Hendry, 2010). Being a research beginner, I felt more secure having a set of guidelines to analyse data. Another limitation was the influence of emerging themes from the first interview. Emerging themes from the first interview may influence the following interviews (Creswell, 2014). This could be avoided to an extent by emphasising the need to approach each case on its own terms (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). The individuality of each case needs to be kept in mind, whilst acknowledging that it is impossible not to be influenced at all by the first interview (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2010). A small sample size may be a further limitation in IPA from a quantitative point of view; however, in qualitative research a small amount of participants gives room for richer depth of analysis which may not happen with a larger sample (Smith, 2010).

The Research Process

Participants & Recruitment

IPA focuses on in-depth analysis, hence the small sample size (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). A small sample size gives space for a more detailed account of each individual's meaning making, leading to better understanding (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Eight participants were chosen for this study.

In order to have a homogeneous sample, participants had to be in the age range of 18 to 35 years old in order to be generally classified as youth (UNESCO, 2017). The homogeneous sample is used to understand a particular group of people in depth (Cohen, 2006). Moreover, the participants were asked to have had an experience in which they felt that an attachment with God had affected them.

I utilised Purposive Sampling, as participants needed to be experienced in the studied phenomenon (Palinkas, et al., 2015). For ethical reasons, the participants were interviewed two years or more after their challenging life situations. Initially, I emailed the University of Malta in order for them to send my request to university students. However, this did not generate any response. For this reason, I opted to use social media as a gatekeeper, whereby I sent a request to different Facebook groups. This ensured an opt-in approach that facilitated potential participants' autonomy in choosing whether they wanted to participate in the research (ESRC, 2015). Participants who desired to take part in the research contacted me by email and they were given the information about the aim of the study, the nature of the interviews, and approximate time allocated to these interviews. If participants still expressed their willingness to proceed, a more detailed information sheet about the study, as well as an informed consent form, were sent, and we set a date and place for the interview that was convenient for each participant. The interviews were held in a private place at the Salesian oratory in Sliema, at a pre-booked room at Mater Dei hospital or in a room at the University of Malta, depending on participant preference.

Method of Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews as this is recommended for IPA studies (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Indeed, this method allows for in-depth interviews to take place effectively. Additionally, since semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for dialogue between the researcher and the participant, it leads to a personal and intimate encounter (Whiting, 2008). For this reason, during the interviews, I participated collaboratively in order to help the participants express themselves and elaborate on their meanings around the topic (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). These one-to-one interviews gave space for the participants to speak and feel heard, or rather listened to (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). It was also an opportunity to explore original and unexpected information that emerged which, as a researcher, I could investigate in more detail (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The active listening skills learnt throughout the Masters in Counselling course helped me to build rapport and gain the participant's trust (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). I kept the idea of having a deep conversation in my mind when I created the interview questions. Since I am a novice in the area of interviewing, I felt that having a simple set of questions would facilitate the flow of the conversation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

The Interviews

Since Malta has a bilingual system, the interview questions were prepared in both English and Maltese in order to ensure that participants spoke in their preferred language. Interview questions were prepared, not merely to serve as a guide, but also to help me reflect on potential difficulties that might be encountered during the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In order to ensure

an authentic dialogue, the interviews did not follow a strict schedule, but were flexible according to what felt comfortable and appropriate with the particular participant (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A pilot interview was held to find out if the questions facilitate the sharing of information related to the research question, and the data gathered from this interview was used in the research. Every interview lasted around 60 minutes. In order to facilitate an accurate recollection of interview data, interviews were audio-recorded (Jain, 2013). Audio-recording the interviews also gave me the possibility to re-listen for clarity and better understanding (Jain, 2013). The initial part of the interviews was dedicated to a thorough explanation of informed consent, including how the interview would be audio-taped and that anonymity of every participant would be kept. Moreover, I explained that my tutor would have access to the anonymised transcriptions, and that data would be kept for some months and destroyed after the dissertation was assessed. Additionally, the aims of the research and the methodology used were also clarified. Once the participant agreed with the terms, the consent form was given to them to sign (Appendix A).

After the interviews, I took short field notes of noticed non-verbal behaviour since they would not be captured with the recording device. Since it is crucial for researchers to reflect on how they may impact the research, reflexivity is required during the process of gathering data and whilst analysing it (Shaw, 2010). For this reason, process notes were written after each interview; this facilitated the process of bringing to awareness personal thoughts that emerged during the interview. The process notes were usually shared with the thesis supervisor after every interview, which helped me

become aware of my blind spots and my influence on the gathered data. The reflective journal helped me later on during the process of analysis to distinguish my thoughts from those of the participants', to identify how I might have influenced the interview, and how the participants' accounts influenced me in turn. A reflexive attitude promotes a holistic approach to the research, thus ensuring an integrated study (Shaw, 2010).

Data Analysis

During the analysis, my role as a researcher was to learn about the participants' psychological view on having an attachment with God whilst experiencing difficult moments in life (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Process notes written after each interview helped me to become aware of my feelings and the potential impact they could have on the analysis. For instance, in one particular interview, the participant assumed that I would not able to hear negative comments about the church and this made me wonder if I was portraying such an image. This insight was important to me, as it made me understand how hard it is to be non-judgmental with participants, and that constant awareness is required.

The first step in data analysis was to transcribe the interviews. Close reading and re-reading of the text is important, together with taking notes of any thoughts, observations and reflections that occur while reading the transcript (Biggerstaff, 2008). This thorough process helped me understand some of the participants' meaning around their mental and social world, which might not have been easily noticeable at first glance (Smith & Osborn, 2007). After this process, the transcriptions were re-read in order to check whether the

connections made were faithful to the participants' words (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Emergent themes were identified from within each section of the transcript and possible connections between themes were recorded in clusters (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Moreover, there were themes that emerged as subordinate concepts (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This process helped me understand common themes amongst the participants that I had interviewed (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Throughout the analysis, I reflected on my personal sense-making of what was being said (Smith & Osborn, 2007). At the end of the process, a final statement outlining the emergent themes was elaborated.

Ethical Consideration

Before conducting this research, FREC and UREC approval were given. Prior to going ahead with the interviews, essential information was given to participants, including the purpose of study, procedures and a clause stipulating that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, with no questions asked (Halai, 2006). Important procedures around anonymity were explained to the participants. Anonymity was kept throughout and participant data could only be accessed by the supervisor and by the examiners, if necessary. Pseudonyms, chosen by the participants themselves, were used during the study, in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality (Kvale, 2007). The participants were asked for permission to audio-record the interviews. Moreover, an informed consent form was given to each participant. This included what would happen with their data and that the recording would be kept for a number of months until the dissertation was assessed. An important element of conducting interviews was

privacy. It was ensured that interviews were held in a private setting in order to avoid any interruptions as well as protect confidentiality.

With interviews, there might be a greater chance of delving into unanticipated areas, leaving the participant feeling exposed (Chambers, Clarke, McDonnell, Thompson, & Tod, 2009). For this reason, I used my counselling skills to monitor how the interview was affecting the participants, especially by observing their non-verbals and what they avoided talking about (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Moreover, I was attentive to the participants' experience throughout the interviews, and if any emotional distress or any kind of discomfort were manifested, this was processed. There was also the possibility of terminating the interview if the participant desired to do so. This was not needed with any of the interviews. Additionally, the participants were offered the possibility of being referred to free counselling sessions if they felt the need.

Quality, Validity and Trustworthiness

Since, in qualitative research, instruments to establish metrics about validity and reliability are not used, it is important to understand how the research study's findings are credible (DeMotts, 2017). Additionally, DeVault (2017) states that, instead of focusing on reliability, the focus in qualitative research is on trustworthiness, constituting of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. Credibility refers to the researcher's confidence in the trustworthiness of the data collected (DeMotts, 2017). Triangulation is often used to ascertain that the data is credible and, in this study, it was done by including many verbatim excerpts in the findings, so that the reader can assess the interpretations made (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin,

2009). Transferability is the extent to which the qualitative researcher demonstrates that the findings are applicable in other similar situations or similar phenomena (DeMotts, 2017). In this study, transferability was ensured through the process of thorough description about how the research study may be applicable in other cases. For instance, the exploration on how a transcendental relationship affected individuals' coping mechanism can be explored in other countries. Confirmability seeks to ensure that the findings are based on the participants' responses, hence limiting, as much as possible, the researcher's bias or personal motivations (DeMotts, 2017). This was done by discussing the findings with my thesis supervisor in order to bring to my awareness any personal motives or blind spots. Moreover, an audit trail of the different research phases and a reflexive diary helped me differentiate between my thoughts and those of the participants (DeMotts, 2017). Finally, dependability shows that the research has enough information to enable others who desire to replicate the study (DeVault, 2017). In this case, the thesis supervisor thoroughly examined the research process and the data analysis to ensure consistent findings, meaning that the study could be repeated (DeMotts, 2017).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an essential aspect of qualitative research (Shaw, 2010). It involves the constant reflection on oneself as a researcher and how I may be affecting the research (Hsiung, 2010). In order to do so, I took a look at my own preconceptions and biases. For instance, a highlighted preconception is that I believe that having an attachment with God will positively affect an individual. I noticed that this preconception hindered me from having a wider view about

having a relationship with God whilst writing the literature review. Talking about it with my supervisor helped me become aware of this and the feelings experienced when researching any negative effects. The process of reflexivity also involves the reflection about one's relationship to the participants, and how it may affect responses to questions (Hsiung, 2010). As mentioned earlier, I reflected on how I may have affected the respondents' way of answering the questions. Being an active volunteer in a religious organisation, I may have unwittingly encouraged participants respond in a positive way about the phenomena, as they may have thought that that was what I wanted to hear.

Additionally, I reflected on how my gender may have affected the dynamics of the relationship with the participants. It may have given the unconscious permission to vent out due to the stereotypes attributed to the female gender of being nurturing and attentive (Collins N. , 2012). In addition, knowing that I was a trainee counsellor may have also given participants the impression that I would provide a space to be open about their perception regarding the studied phenomena. Another important factor present in the study was the culture I was brought up in. Living on a Catholic island, surrounded by churches and religious people, as well as my upbringing, will all have influenced the way I perceived and experienced at the studied phenomena. Being aware of my cultural background is important in order to understand that every individual has a different culture, even though one may be living in the same country (Dressel, 2014). As a qualitative researcher, I recognise that the interview itself is an interactive process of meaning-making; thus, whilst interpreting the data, thorough reflection was done on the entire research context (Hsiung, 2010).

Through reflexive thinking and writing, I learnt that the research impacted me in several ways. As mentioned earlier, I first understood the initial signs of personal prejudice when I started researching the topic. I noticed that I found it hard to read about negative implications of religion. It was at this point that I realised that my personal baggage needed to be addressed in order for it not to impinge on my research without my knowledge. Through this, I became more open to listening to different experiences regarding the topic, and this helped me be less judgmental during the interviews. During particular interviews, I noticed strong feelings surfacing such as anger, shock and astonishment when they shared their experience about the church in Malta. When I processed these feelings, I was more able to understand the participants' experiences. Consequently, this reflection facilitated the process of analysis, as it was easier to empathise with the participants' point of view. For these reasons, I felt that the research helped me witness that each person experiences hardship and the relationship with God in a unique way, and listening to the participants' stories helped me respect this notion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to reflect on the methodology used for this study. I endeavoured to explain the rationale behind the theory used, including the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, how the participants were chosen, and how the data was generated and analysed. Moreover, ethical considerations were explained. Methods of enhancing quality, validity and trustworthiness were discussed, together with a reflection about reflexivity. Ultimately, the reason for this chapter was to provide the reader with a clear framework for the study, ahead of the discussion of findings.

Presentation of Findings

The aim of this chapter is to present the participants' experience of how their relationship with God affected them during challenging situations. I will attempt to use participants' own words to illustrate the idiosyncrasies of their perceptions and experiences in relation to the research question. The data analysis yielded eight super-ordinate themes together with a number of sub-ordinate themes, as shown in Table 2.

Demographic Details of the Participants

The participants' demographic details are presented in Table 1 below. For further information regarding each participant refer to Appendix E. In order to preserve anonymity, all names are in fact pseudonyms, and specific details have been left out to ensure privacy.

Table 1. Demographic details of participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Difficult situation, as stated by participant	Age at the time of difficult situation	Occupation
Pawlu	21	Male	Was involved in a car accident	18	Student
Mark	25	Male	Struggled to come out as a gay person, and went through a betrayal in his first romantic relationship	20	Sales Representative
Dominic	22	Male	Brought up in a Christian residential care home for children; overdosed after learning that his partner cheated on him	18	Student
Elizabeth	22	Female	Struggled with anxiety and had to dissolve the religious group that she was in charge of	18	Student
Jennifer	23	Female	Experienced social anxiety disorder after learning that she was betrayed by a friend	19	Student
Emily	19	Female	Finds it hard to open up and experienced rejection from her close friends	14	Student
Joshua	30	Male	Experienced worthlessness due to difficult situations whilst growing up	25	Student
Chloe	19	Female	Assisted her father whilst having a heart attack	13	Student

The Main Identified Themes

Data analysis was carried out using Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis (IPA), following the procedure proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin

(2009). This yielded eight super-ordinate themes, all of which are all interlinked.

These are shown in Table 2 below, followed by an elaboration on each

category of themes.

Table 2. Youth's experience of how attachment with God affected them during difficult situations

SUPER-ORDINATE THEMES	SUB-ORDINATE THEMES
Theme 1: **Teaching about God framed in terms of morality**	1. Negative effects of the church 2. Judgmental 3. Moral development 4. Right from wrong
Theme 2: **Vulnerability leading to a deeper relationship with God**	1. Rock bottom situations leading to seeking a relationship with God 2. Feeling lonely 3. Feeling abandoned
Theme 3: **God as a powerful caregiver**	1. One can always depend on God 2. God provides external strength 3. Events fitting within God's plans 4. Contrast with one's own parents
Theme 4: **God as a safe haven**	1. Availability 2. Unconditional love 3. Reliability 4. God as a friend
Theme 5: **Maintaining proximity with God**	1. Helps reduce anxiety 2. Prayer
Theme 6: **God giving meaning to life**	1. Finding one's own purpose 2. God's calling 3. God's plans 4. Challenges are useful to grow
Theme 7: **Sense of belonging**	1. Community 2. Feeling useful 3. Feeling valued
Theme 8: **Spiritual guide: A mediator between God and person**	1. Cultivating a relationship with God 2. Resolving doubts 3. Filling the void created through disappointment by God 4. Reconciling with God

Theme 1: Teaching about God Framed in Terms of Morality

Most of the participants highlighted a discrepancy between their experience of the church and God. God was described as being loving and accepting, whilst the church was depicted as judgmental. Mark, who spent most of his childhood as an altar boy in his local church, felt hurt when he perceived discrimination by the church regarding homosexuality. In fact, when he was struggling to come out as a gay person, he felt that the church did not accept his sexuality,

"Kont ngħid lil Alla, jiena gay, taf, u jgħidu li forsi l-knisja ma tantx tapprova l-gays" (Mark, p. 7, lines 143-144).

"I used to tell God, I am gay, you know this, and they say that the church might not approve so much of gays" (Mark, p. 7, lines 143-144).

He stated that the church's teachings about homosexuality make him feel different from others. This leaves him feeling angry about anything related to the church,

"Għax jekk noqgħod inħares lejn il-knisja u x'tgħid il-knisja, ġieli nieħu għalija u neħodha kontra kulħadd" (Mark, p. 19, lines 369-371).

"Because if I had to take notice of the church and what the church says, I would sometimes feel offended and disagree with everyone" (Mark, p. 19, lines 369-371).

Mark echoes the idea that there is a difference between how the church and God looks at people. He said,

"Alla ma jafx jagħmel distinzjoni, il-knisja tagħmel, inħoss; li għalkemm miexja 'l quddiem ħafna, inħoss li tagħmel" (Mark, p. 21, lines 396-398).

"God does not know how to distinguish; but I feel that the church does; even though the church is moving forward I feel that it does distinguish" (Mark, p. 21, lines 396-398).

Dominic, who spent all his life with priests and nuns, as he was brought up in a Christian residential home after his father abandoned him, shared that he was angry towards the church when he heard about the abuses perpetrated by priests. He said,

"Bdejt nisma' ħafna fuq l-abbużi li kienu qed jagħmlu l-qassisin, dik kienet naqra blow ukoll u minn hemm qisni ħadtha kontra l-knisja" (Dominic, p. 1, lines 16-17).

"I started hearing a lot about the abuses perpetrated by priests and this was quite a blow which led me to take it against the church" (Dominic, p. 1, lines 16-17).

Jennifer enjoys greeting newcomers at the religious youth group that she is part of. She mentioned that new members tell her they perceive God as judgmental. Jennifer imagines that this might be coming from the fact that some priests focus excessively on people's wrongdoings. She pointed out that,

"Għall-meeting jiġu four hundred people, tipo ġieli noqgħodu nduru

"Four hundred people attend our meetings, and sometimes we go

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nagħmlu greeting u hekk u jgħiduli…dejjem kont nara lil Alla judgmental" (Jennifer, p. 10, lines 222-223).

around greeting each other, and that is what they tell me… I always saw God as judgmental (Jennifer, p. 10, lines 222-223).

She stated that certain priests use their homilies to accuse people of wrongdoing, and this pushes people away from the church.

"Jew inkella jaqbdu they pin point, joqogħdu jagħtu tort, ħafna tort għax int tagħmel hekk u int tagħmel hekk…naħseb il-judgmental part hija xi ħaġa li ħafna nies warrbu l-knisja" (Jennifer, p. 10, lines 206-210).

"Or else they start pin pointing and blaming, they blame a lot, for doing this and doing that…I think that due to this judgmental part a lot of people have put the church aside" (Jennifer, p. 10, lines 206-210).

This was echoed by Chloe, who is a member of another religious youth group. She perceives the church as being imperfect. In her view, the church is at fault:

"Għax il-knisja magħmula min-nies kollha faulty so ovvjament il-knisja faulty għax hemm aħna involved fiha! Qisu nagħmel distinction bejn Alla u l-knisja u qisu l-affarjiet il-ħżiena tal-knisja" (Chloe, p. 8, lines 176-178).

"Because the church is made up of faulty human beings, it is obvious that the church is faulty as we are involved! I make a distinction between God and the church and the wrongdoings of the church" (Chloe, p. 8, lines 176-178).

Participants disclosed that their moral development was highly influenced by the church's teachings. Chloe still remembers her mother's repetitive words, which shaped her perception about the value of love and sacrifice:

"Il-mummy meta konna zgħar kienet tgħid: love is sacrifice, Ġesu' ta ħajtu u love is sacrifice, jiena m'għandix aptit qed inwassalkhom xorta, hekk dak il-values li finally they root to Ġesu'" (Chloe, p. 24, lines 543-545).

"When we were young our mother used to tell us that love is sacrifice, Jesus gave up his life and love is sacrifice, even though I do not feel like driving you I still do, these values finally root to Jesus" (Chloe, p. 24, lines 543-545).

Furthermore, Chloe pointed out, that Jesus is her role model on how to live a good life.

"Il-mod ta kif nagħmel ħajti nirriflettiha fuq il-passi ta' Ġesu', il-valuri li tagħna Ġesu' b'ħajtu" (Chloe, p. 25, lines 556-557).

"The way I live, I chose to reflect Jesus's life in my own, the values he gave us throughout his life" (Chloe, p. 25, lines 556-557).

Elizabeth, who struggles with anxiety and spends her free time volunteering with a religious youth group, explained that Christian values have helped her become altruistic:

"Il-fatt li jien nagħti valur kbir għall-fatt li ngħin lil ħaddieħor, naf li dik ġejja

"The fact that I highly value helping others, I know that this is derived

mir-reliġjon" (Elizabeth, p. 17, lines 372-373).	from my religion" (Elizabeth, p. 17, lines 372-373).

Joshua and Chloe attribute their well-developed conscience to the religious teachings, as exemplified by this quote:

"Our conscience, all the good things do this, do that. The moment I hear don't do this, do this because you will do better in life that distinction by nature I know what is good and bad" (Joshua, p. 21, lines 473-475).

For Elizabeth, the consequence of not following one's conscience is guilt. Elizabeth mentioned that, when this happens, she usually turns to confession:

"Ikun hemm dak il-pass li jien, waħdi, I accept what has happened u imbagħad immur għall-qrar biex qisni I can start from a clean slate" (Elizabeth, p. 19, lines 426-427).	"There is that step where I, personally, accept what has happened and then go for confession to sort of start from a clean slate" (Elizabeth, p. 19, lines 426-427).

Additionally, Elizabeth mentioned that religion instigates a desire to be a better person.

"Inqabbilha ħafna mar-reliġjon l-idea li I have to be better, li there is always something you can do better, li you have to always be good" (Elizabeth, p. 22, lines 430- 432).	"I compare the idea that you have to be better with religion, that there is always something you can do better and that you always have to be good" (Elizabeth, p. 22, lines 430- 432).

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Theme 2: Vulnerability Leading to a Deeper Relationship with God

All participants attributed the desire to connect to a higher power to a challenging life experience. When Pawlu was laying helplessly in his hospital bed, he had no one to turn to other than God:

"Qabel ma kontx daqshekk close m'Alla u meta kont l-isptar, kont jiena li staqsejt li mmur nisma' quddies il-Ħadd, avolja ma stajtx għax kont fis-sodda; u gie qassis iqarbinni. I looked forward to it" (Pawlu, p. 6, lines 126-130).

"I wasn't as close with God back then; however, when I was recovering in hospital, I asked to attend mass on Sunday, even though I couldn't move from my bed; and a priest came to my bed to give me Holy Communion. I looked forward to it" (Pawlu, p. 6, lines 126-130).

Mark desperately turned to God upon learning that his partner was cheating on him with Mark's ex:

"Qatt ma emmintha, li Alla jista' jieħu ħsieb kollox. Imma dak iż-żmien ma kelli l-ebda option oħra! Jien għalija, ħajti kienet waqfet, għalija ħajti kienet spiċċat!" (Mark, p. 6, lines 114-116).

"I never believed, that God could take care of everything. At that point in time I had no other option! My life had stopped, my life was over!" (Mark, p. 6, lines 114-116).

Like Pawlu and Mark, other participants mentioned that their relationship with God took off when their life had reached rock bottom. Joshua mentioned that he had experienced utter darkness and felt worthless. This led him to start a journey with God:

"By the age of fourteen I was totally gone you know, completely shattered, completely destroyed and I just thought to myself: I was worthless, absolutely worthless, and I said ok, I want you in my life" (Joshua, p. 3, lines 45-47).

According to participants, having a relationship with God helped them on their journey of self-discovery and making meaning out of their rock bottom situation. For example, Elizabeth said,

"Bdejt niskopri mill-ġdid lil Alla u lili nnifsi through Him (Elizabeth, p. 9, line 200).	"I started getting to know God all over again and myself through Him (Elizabeth, p. 9, line 200).

Theme 3: God as a Powerful Caregiver

By crying out to God for justice, Mark experienced a feeling of being held by him:

"Kont ngħid lil Alla: imma din jiena ma tixraqlix! ...u bdejt inħoss ir-refuġju ta' xi ħadd li verament qed jgħini!" (Mark, p. 6, lines 110-111).	"I used to tell God: I don't deserve this! …and I started feeling the refuge of someone who was truly helping me out" (Mark, p. 6, lines 110-111).

This feeling was shared by other participants, as succinctly described by Joshua:

"God will take care of you no matter what" (Joshua, p. 3, line 49).

Participants revealed that connecting with God provided them with external strength that helped them get through difficult moments in their lives. This was eloquently stated by Chloe, as she disclosed how painful it was for her to see

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her father deteriorate during the heart attack. The only comfort she found was in God, who, according to her, gave her the strength to survive:

"Alla qed jagħti l-kuraġġ. Min kieku ħa jagħti l-kuraġġ? Li qisek Alla jtik il-kuraġġ biex tibqa' għaddej. Dik nemminha 100%." (Chloe, p. 13, line 295-296).

"God is giving courage. Who else could give courage? God provides courage to move forward. I believe that 100%" (Chloe, p. 13, line 295-296).

Pawlu also spoke about the strength he felt God gave him, especially before serious operations and during painful recoveries:

"Jekk taċċettah, fl-agħar żmien tiegħek ħa jtik is-saħħa biex tkompli" (Pawlu, p. 17, lines 383-384).

"If you accept God, he will provide you with strength to move on in your worst situations" (Pawlu, p. 17, lines 383-384).

Similarly, Mark claimed that,

"Kelli extra strength li it was coming from God, definitely from God" (Mark, p. 8, line 162).

"I had extra strength, which was coming from God, definitely from God" (Mark, p. 8, line 162).

According to Joshua, the deepest issues affecting one's life can only be healed by God:

"Only God can go into the deep wounds because that is his area, only he can penetrate there, only he can see there! No counsellor, nothing in this world can go deep down there!" (Joshua, p. 2, lines 41-43).

Additionally, trusting in God's timing was essential, according to Mark and Emily:

"Anke jekk il-viżjoni t'Alla, orrajt min jaf kemm fadlilha, imma ħa tkun orrajt" (Mark, p. 16, lines 299-300).

"Even if God's vision might take a long time, but you will be all right" (Mark, p. 16, lines 299-300).

This was also the case with Emily; despite her efforts to join a religious group when she was younger, this did not materialise at the time. She managed to join later on, at a time when she really needed genuine friends:

"Mill-ewwel ftit ġimgħat li bdejt ninżel il-youth centre, dħalt fil-choir u tant kemm ġara kollox f'daqqa ngħid, naħseb ma ġratx qabel għax ma kellix nibda niġi qabel, u ġrat dak iż-żmien għax dak iż-żmien riedni nibda niġi hawn" (Emily, p. 5, lines 93-96).

"From the first weeks of attending the youth centre, I joined the choir and everything happened so quickly, I tell myself, I think it didn't happen before because it wasn't meant to be, and it happened at that time because that was the time when He wanted me to come here" (Emily, p. 5, lines 93-96).

Some participants compared God with their primary caregivers; in fact, some loving qualities are found in both. This was beautifully described by Mark:

"Il-fatt li hemm imħabba bla qies, dik inħossha minn ommi u missieri t-tnejn li huma, li hija bħall-imħabba t'Alla" (Mark, p. 13, 260-261).

"The fact that there is endless love, I feel that from both my mother and father, which is similar to God's love" (Mark, p. 13, 260-261).

Nevertheless, participants claimed that they felt more comfortable talking openly to God than with their parents. For example, Elizabeth mentioned,

"M'Alla hemm dik il-bluntness, li jkolli xi ħaġa f'moħħi I just say it, li m'għandix m'ommi, avolja close" (Elizabeth, p.15, lines 328-330).

"With God, there is bluntness, where I just say whatever comes to mind, something I do not have with my mother, even though we are close" (Elizabeth, p.15, lines 328-330).

Theme 4: God as a Safe Haven

Pawlu believes that, in the same way that he experienced the greatness of God's availability, anyone could share his experience. In fact, he stated that,

"Alla qiegħed hemm għal kulħadd, it's if you accept him; jekk ma taċċettaħx, ħa jibqa' ħdejk xorta, anke fil-ħinijiet ħżiena tiegħek" (Pawlu, p. 17, lines 382-383).

"God is available for anyone, it's if you accept him; if you don't accept him, he would still stay by your side, even in your hardest times" (Pawlu, p. 17, lines 382-383).

Similarly, Mark asserted that God's reliability encourages him to confront issues in his life:

"Naf li qisu at some point, kull meta jkolli problema dejjem ħa jkun hemm u hu jimlini b'ċertu qawwa" (Mark, p. 17, lines 325-326).

"I know that at some point, whenever I have a problem, he will always be there and he will provide me with certain strength" (Mark, p. 17, lines 325-326).

Jennifer, Joshua, Mark, and Chloe echoed Bowlby's (1973) statement that unconditional love was a significant characteristic that allowed for an affectionate bond to develop, thus providing a safe haven. This was illustrated by Joshua's experience:

"So it is perfect love, perfect relationship; and it's a relationship that I can depend on, a relationship that I can count on. A relationship that, if I fail, from the other side he will not fail me. Even if I don't love, he will continue to love me" (Joshua, p. 17, lines 379-382).

On several occasions, participants stated that God is reliable, especially when compared to other people in their life:

"He is here to stay, kind of…hemm ħa jkun, u s'issa qiegħdin tajjeb u naf li ħa jibqa' hemm so tajjeb, ħaddieħor fid-dinja llum hawn u ma tafx għada" (Mark, p. 16, lines 305-308).

"He is here to stay, kind of…he will be there, and until now we are on good terms and I know that he will remain there and that is good, other people on earth might be here today but you wouldn't know about tomorrow" (Mark, p. 16, lines 305-308).

Together with being reliable, God was depicted as approachable, to the extent that Jennifer and Mark described God as their best friend:

"He is someone that I can talk to, I can have a conversation knowing that he will not be judging, he is a father and a friend; nothing, no one compares to him" (Jennifer, p. 5, lines 97-99).

Theme 5: Maintaining Proximity with God

The majority of participants claimed that spending time with God was a significant part of the day. For example, Mark said that,

"Illum-il ġurnata huwa ħabib bħal litteralment bħal best friend tiegħi li ġieli anke mmur il-kappella tas-sagrament, ngħid ħa mmur għax veru għandi aptitu" (Mark, p. 10, lines 198-199).

"Nowadays he is like my friend, literally like my best friend, such that sometimes, I go to the chapel to visit the sacrament because I really feel like meeting him" (Mark, p. 10, lines 198-199).

The close relationship with God seemed to provide participants with a sense of serenity. For example, Elizabeth said,

"Meta nkun close m'Alla, inkun aktar kalma, peaceful" (Elizabeth, p. 7, line 137).

"When I am close with God, I am calmer and peaceful" (Elizabeth, p. 7, line 137).

On similar lines, Jennifer said,

"When I am in the presence of God, qisni I am flying on air" (Jennifer, p. 4, lines 74-75).

"When I am in the presence of God, I feel like flying on air" (Jennifer, p. 4, lines 74-75).

For Chloe and Jennifer, prayer helps them feel close to God, and this reduces anxiety. Chloe, who described herself as an anxious person, generally feels calmer after praying. She said,

"Inbagħti naqra bl-anxiety, I try to control it billi nitlob" (Chloe, p. 37, line 905).

"I suffer slightly from anxiety and I try to control it by praying" (Chloe, p. 37, line 905).

Likewise, Jennifer explained that, whenever she prays less, her anxiety level increases,

"We all pass from those downhills, li la mmur nitlob, ma mmurx quddies, dawn is-small phases fejn tgħid x'inhu jiġri, u ninduna għax inkun very snappy, nibda l-ħsibijiet tiegħi jkunu all over the place taf kif? Ikolli xeba anxiety għal xejn. Imbagħad meta qisni I say all right, taf x'inhu jiġri, go back, go back to your first home taf kif? Home…imbagħad I will be ok" (Jennifer, p. 4, lines 83-87).

"We all go through downhills, where I don't pray, I don't go to mass, small phases where I ask myself what is happening? And I realize because I become very snappy and my thoughts are all over the place. I end up with a lot of anxiety to no avail. Then I tell myself, all right, you know what is happening to you, go back, go back to your first home, home…and then I will be ok" (Jennifer, p. 4, lines 83-87).

Theme 6: God Giving Meaning to Life

The notion that God gives purpose to life was predominantly mentioned by Pawlu, Mark, Chloe, and Joshua. This sentiment was a powerful leitmotif in Pawlu's interview:

"I am back to fulfil my life. To fulfil my purpose in life u fl-aħħar mill-aħħar,

"I am back to fulfil my life. To fulfil my purpose in life and at the end of the

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kieku m'hemmx Alla, no one has a purpose in life. Through Alla you find your purpose" (Pawlu, p. 21, lines 460-462).

day, if there wasn't God, no one has a purpose in life. Through God you find your purpose" (Pawlu, p. 21, lines 460-462).

Similarly, Chloe believes that meaning in her life is largely due to God's presence. She stated,

"Il-ħajja ta' kif qed ngħix jien fiha s-sens, li Alla jagħtini purpose" (Chloe, p. 35, lines 704-705).

"The way I am living my life makes sense, it is God that gives me a purpose" (Chloe, p. 35, lines 704-705).

Mark also said,

"Alla huwa kbir, li jkollu pjan ta' kollox u jieħu ħsieb kollox" (Mark, p. 8, line 157).

"God is so big that he has a plan for everything and takes care of everything" (Mark, p. 8, line 157).

According to Joshua, God's desire for him was to abandon his lifestyle and start living a religious life. This was highlighted when he said,

"I just felt God challenging me and asking me to let go of everything and I let go. I didn't know what he was asking me to let go and why. And he told me to let go of the career, let go your life and I want you to become a priest, and I said ok, and here I am studying theology" (Joshua, p. 1, lines 5-8).

However, whilst some might enjoy the idea of God having a plan for them, Emily struggles to understand whether she is doing what is expected of her. She said,

"Qisni naf li qiegħed hemm u naf li għandu pjan pero ma nafx x'inhu l-pjan u ma nafx jekk hux qed nimxi fid-direzzjoni t-tajba għal dan il-pjan" (Emily, p. 9, lines 194-196).

"It is like I know that he is there and he has a plan however, I do not know what the plan is and I do not know if I am walking in the right direction towards this plan" (Emily, p. 9, lines 194-196).

On the other hand, Chloe and Joshua strongly believe that hardships faced in life are God's way of helping us to grow. Chloe claimed,

"Alla, litteralment għaddieni minn challenge biex nitgħallem minnha" (Chloe, p. 20, lines 500-501).

"God, literally made me go through a challenge to learn from it" (Chloe, p. 20, lines 500-501).

Joshua felt that accepting God's challenges helped him conquer impossible tasks. He stated,

"God is challenging me here and I said, Lord this is going to be impossible, and he just told me, trust me and I will do the impossible" (Joshua, p. 9, lines 193-194).

Theme 7: Sense of Belonging

Jennifer and Emily, who are both actively involved in a religious youth centre, shared what they value in their community. The importance of belonging to something was echoed by Jennifer, who said,

"In the community you are not a number, you are literally, isma' inti Jennifer, you have this much importance, we give this much importance to you. It's literally, vera you are not a number! You are someone!" (Jennifer, p. 16, lines 359-361).

"In the community you are not a number, you are literally, hey you are Jennifer, you have this much importance, we give this much importance to you. It's literally, really you are not a number! You are someone!" (Jennifer, p. 16, lines 361).

Similarly, Emily spoke about how attending the religious youth centre helped her change the way she looked at herself. She stated,

"Qabel ma bdejt immur il-youth centre kont naħseb li m'inhix ħabiba tajba, m'inhix persuna tajba u kont vera waqajt ħazin. Imbagħad kont niġi l-youth centre u hekk, u bdejt nagħmel il-ħbieb u kulħadd kien qisu jafdani u hekk, u bdejt ngħid jista' jkun li m'huwiex tort tiegħi li ġġieldu miegħi sħabi?" (Emily, p. 3, lines 43-46).

"Before attending the youth centre I used to think that I am not a good friend, that I am not a good person and this really put me down. When I started attending the youth centre I made friends and everyone started trusting me and this made me think, could it be it's not my fault that I parted from my friends?" (Emily, p. 3, lines 43-46).

Both Pawlu and Chloe emphasised the importance of family and friends as a support system, and they both believe that it was God who provided these significant relationships. For example, Chloe said,

"Jiena kont għaddejja minn żmien diffiċli u provdieli ħabib biex jismagħni" (Chloe, p. 15, lines 336-337).	"I was going through rough times and he provided me with a friend who could listen to me" (Chloe, p. 15, lines 336-337).

Likewise, Pawlu said,

"Skoprejt l-imħabba t'Alla through nies bħala familjari u through eżempju speċjalment kuġinuwi għax l-aktar wieħed li dar bija" (Pawlu, p. 1, lines 11-13).	"I discovered God's love through people like my family, especially my cousin who was the one who took care of me the most" (Pawlu, p. 1, lines 11-13).

Theme 8: Spiritual Guide: A Mediator between God and Person

All participants mentioned that another religious person had helped them cultivate a relationship with God. Jennifer explained that she is accompanied on her journey with God. She stated,

"Għandi spiritual director u jekk ikolli mistoqsija jew diffikulta', I take it up with him and it helps a lot, ħafna tgħin" (Jennifer, p. 7, lines 147-148).	"I have a spiritual director and if I have a question or a difficulty, I discuss this with him and it helps a lot, it really helps" (Jennifer, p. 7, lines 147-148).

When Dominic was admitted to Mount Carmel Hospital, he felt abandoned by God. However, over time, he desired to reconnect with God and, according to him, this necessitated the help of a trustworthy priest. Dominic said,

"Bdejt qisni nerġa nersaq bilmogħod lura lejn Alla, għax kellimt lil Fr. John, għidtlu xi nħoss… Fr. John hu l-aktar li nafda bl-affarjiet personali tiegħi. L-ewwel ħassejtni naqra uncomfortable ngħidlu li, isma' tlift il-fidi peress li hu kien il-persuna li kien sawwarni bil-fidi. Imma kien vera understanding milli kont għaddejt jien u għini biex nsib posti" (Dominic, p. 3, lines 75-80).

"I started getting slowly closer to God because I opened up to Fr. John, I told him what I feel…Fr. John is the person I trust most with my personal things. At first, I felt uncomfortable to tell him, hey I lost faith since it was he who instilled faith in me. But he was very understanding with what I went through and helped me to find my place" (Dominic, p. 3, lines 75-80).

Priests helped Pawlu, Mark, and Elizabeth to understand God's plan for them, especially when they questioned God's existence. For example, Pawlu said,

"Tkellimt ma' saċerdoti li jiena ftaħt qalbi magħhom biex jiena nġib l-output tagħhom, li huwa l-kelma, il-messaġġ minn Alla imma through someone" (Pawlu, p. 12, lines 271-273).

"I talked to priests and opened up to them in order to get their opinion, which for me is the word, the message from God but through someone (Pawlu, p. 12, lines 271-273).

According to Mark, the priest that celebrates the mass he participates in, is

God's instrument, passing on his message to him. Mark said,

"Fr. Matthew, għalija huwa l-messaġġier t'Alla" (Mark, p. 21, line 450).	"For me, Fr. Matthew is God's messenger" (Mark, p. 21, line 450).

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to describe the experiences of youth who

feel that their relationship with God affected their management of difficult

circumstances in the past. The interviews provided an opportunity to gain

deeper understanding of their perceptions on their attachment with God and its

meaning for them during tough times. It was interesting to note that, while the

aim of this study is not (and cannot) provide generalisations, several themes

were shared by all participants and multiple commonalities could be identified.

The next chapter will discuss the findings in light of literature relevant to this

study.

Discussion of Findings

Following an illustration of participants' stories of how an attachment with God affected them whilst going through a tough situation, this chapter will seek to discuss the main findings in light of existing literature. The chapter will therefore address the following topics: discrepancy in participants' understanding of church and God, seeking an attachment with God in stressful times, characteristics of God as a caregiver, finding meaning in difficulties, a sense of belonging to a community, and the need for a mediator between God and man. Implications and recommendations for counsellors are weaved throughout.

Discrepancy between the Church and God Understandings

A strong contrast between participants' notions of church and God emerged in all the interviews held for the purpose of this study. Participants shared that, prior to them encountering God, their perception of him was that he was judgmental and not interested in them. This stemmed mainly from the church's teachings, which may have impacted on the participant's meaning of their relationship with God. It was interesting to learn that participants were disappointed with how priests from certain localities portrayed a disapproving God. Whilst this was different from my personal experience, I do need to bear in mind that I come from one particular branch of the Maltese church which might not necessarily mirror the whole church reality. Participants' views of a judgmental church mirrors a dominant view about Christians and the church (Malec, 2018). Christian teachings tends to present two main dimensions: the first is that God is love and the second is that God is just. When the focus rests on the latter, the person might feel judged (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2016). This made me wonder to what extent the Maltese church tends to emphasise the

justice aspect, rather than the loving nature of God. Indeed, the youth interviewed felt hurt by the way they were judged by the church. Thirteen years ago, Ciorbaru et al (2005) suggested that the Catholic Church in Malta was a significant role model for young people; this made me wonder about the repercussions that having a critical role model might have had on young adults. It is interesting to note that Christianity focuses on the figure of Jesus, who was never a judgmental presence. This creates a contradiction and eventually leads to cognitive dissonance (Krejcir, 2003). Regrettably, this cognitive dissonance might greatly harm people, as well as pushing them away from the church (Krejcir, 2003).

The discussion will now shift to how a judgmental church might psychologically harm young people. One of the participants stated that the church made him doubt his personal significance, due to his sexual orientation. Given that the church occupied a very dominant position here in Malta made me wonder about the extent to which its influence fuelled a rise in homophobia, leading people to feel inferior, and lack self-worth (Chalke, Sansbury, & Streeter, 2017). It is known that discrimination leads to mental health issues and a sense of societal inferiority (Chalke, Sansbury, & Streeter, 2017). Research notes that local churches in England were one of the biggest sources of direct discrimination, leading gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to spiritual, mental, and physical harm. At its worst, this has also led to suicide (Knapton, 2017). Another participant talked about how the church influenced her perception of not being good enough; since she also described herself as having an anxious personality, I wonder whether there is a link. Social relationships are stronger in religious institutions and self-worth is strengthened

by social relationships (Krause, 2009). For this reason, relationships developed

within the church may be instrumental in the development of one's self-worth

(Krause, 2009). Conversely, when individuals within the church project religious

motivations for an egoistic reason rather than an altruistic one, the church-

based social support destroys feelings of self-esteem (Krause, 2009). Again,

this makes me wonder about the link between a critical church and the possible

impact on self-esteem, together with the long-term effects on young people.

I was not aware of the link between Catholicism and moral development

until it was highlighted by the participants. Given that all participants were

brought up in a Catholic environment, the expectations of what a good

Christian should be like may have affected their moral development. The term

conscience emerged during the interviews; this refers to a process that seeks

to determine the right action in challenging situations (Spohn, 2000). When

participants talked about how their conscience was influenced by Jesus'

teachings, I ascribed it to role modelling. I wonder if imitating Jesus made them

feel acceptable to parents who may have portrayed Jesus as the ideal person.

Moreover, as discussed in the literature review, it may be that securely

attached individuals corresponded to their attachment figure's religiousness

(Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). In fact, all participants related the nature of the

attachment with God to their caregivers. Being aware of how Christianity may

affect moral development is therefore crucial for counsellors who see religious

clients, in order to be open to the clients' meanings of life events and their

sense of themselves. This will reduce the risk of therapists potentially avoiding

discussions of spirituality, or even pathologising it (Psaila, 2012).

Seeking an Attachment with God in Stressful Times

People have different types of attachments with God such as avoidance of intimacy, anxiety about abandonment and secure attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). This finding is confirmed in this study, as the particpants shared different kinds of attachments with God which affected their way of coping. Most of the participants shared that they trust God completely, whilst others felt anxious about not feeling God's presence constantly in their life. The findings show that participants feel that an authentic relationship with God started following a hardship in life, when they felt like giving up. This is in line with Pargament's (1997) research about how people turn to God in their suffering. Suffering seems to be a critical experience for Christians to encounter God; Hilker (2005) states that it is in the darkest of times that the power of God is felt more than ever. The difficult experiences that the participants lived included betrayal, social exclusion, worthlessness and trauma. All of them reported experiencing loneliness when they felt at rock bottom. One might wonder about the extent to which feeling isolated affects the desire to connect to a higher power; potentially, he would not let them down as other human beings did. Freud (1961) argued in a disparaging manner, that the concept of having God in one's life could act as a buffer against isolation. For Freud, consolation from religion is similar to a narcotic drug and thus, unrealistic and more of a wishful thinking idea (Beck, 2004). This thought initiated the question of whether religion acts as a defensive mechanism or as an awareness of the existential functioning of the belief idea (Beck, 2004). Beck (2004) concludes that religion does function as a defence mechanism. However, the non-defensive religious motivation shows that some individuals seek a relationship

with God not to repress the existential terror, but to become a true self separating from the cultural oppressions of what makes a man (Beck, 2004). Aydin, Fischer, and Frey (2010) stated that several individuals found comfort in religion when facing a variety of problems such as discrimination, illness, terrorist attacks, and loss of a child. Since the purpose of the study was to find out more about the effects of turning to God in difficult moments, the following paragraphs will discuss participants' views on God's influence on them during such circumstances.

Characteristics of God as a Caregiver

God as a Powerful Caregiver

Whilst each of the participants explained their reasons for turning to God in their particular situation, a common theme emerged: that of experiencing God as a caregiver. Most participants claimed that when they connected with God, they experienced an external strength. This was explained as being a force that aided their acceptance to what had happened and helped them to learn from the situation. This led me to think that participants' relationship with God might have been a source of resilience (Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013). This finding is consistent with research, which posits that people who experience God have a belief system that gives strength in times of distress (Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). However, in order to undergo such an experience one must have a positive image of God, that is, one must view God as loving (Nguyen, Bellehumeur, & Malette, 2015). It is not surprising to note that all participants experienced God as loving and caring. Dezutter, et al. (2010) found that perceiving God as loving and comforting helped people interpret illness in a constructive way. Francis,

Gibson, and Robbins (2001) also found that a loving image of God is linked to happiness and overall well-being. This may help us understand one of the possible motivations underlying people's need to seek a relationship with God, especially in troubling times. Furthermore, this finding makes me wonder about the extent to which the relationship with God is tapped on in counselling, as a potential protective attachment figure for clients. Unfortunately, the clients' spiritual concerns are said to be ignored in psychological practise and this decreases the effectiveness of counselling for some clients (Turell & Thomas, 2002). Counsellors might avoid the topic of spirituality and religion, due to different beliefs than their clients, which may lead to controversy (Michelle, 2017). However, addressing the individual's spiritual beliefs is linked to better process of healing (Michelle, 2017).

God as a Safe Haven

God's availability was mentioned in many of the interviews done in this research. One particular participant claimed that God was not as available as he desired. In fact, one might wonder if this experience added to his distress and hindered him from coping with the challenging situation. In certain instances, this is considered negative religious coping, which is said to increase anxiety and have poorer adjustment (Thuné-Boyle, Stygall, Keshtgar, Davidson, & Newman, 2013). The rest of the participants claimed that God is always available; however, he needs to be welcomed in one's life. This made me wonder whether this perception was derived from their personal experience or from ingrained Catholic teachings. In order to understand better, I questioned participants about how they experienced God's availability, and some of them shared their experience. Following the original distressing

experience, whenever they encountered another difficulty in life, they turned to God and experienced his comfort and wisdom to overcome the challenge. Moreover, one participant highlighted the certainty that, whatever the future held, God is present. Consistent availability is one of the characteristics of a secure attachment bond, which becomes a safe haven for the individual in times of distress (Bowlby, 1973). Therefore, one may postulate that God is experienced as a safe haven. A safe haven provides peace of mind that everything will turn out well; such an attachment figure provides a safe haven, leading to a sense of optimism. This is in line with God being perceived as a source of hope (Sim & Loh, 2003). Again, this finding is consistent with Kimball, Boyatzis, Cook, Leonard, and Flanagan (2013) who proposed that emerging young adults see God as a safe haven and a secure base.

Maintaining Proximity with God

Bowlby (1969) states that individuals seek proximity to their attachment figure for safety. Additionally, Granqvist, Mikulincer and Shaver (2010) claim that believers desire to feel close to God, and this is done by praying and visiting churches. Findings from this study are similar, in a that participants stated that it is crucial to spend time with God and pray, as it decreases their anxiety level. Religion can be used for defensive purposes, such as when someone is unable to stay with anxiety, and this may be worrying as it may result in avoidance of reality (Zeinalizade Tari, Sohbi-Gharamaleki, Hojjati, & Alian, 2014). On the other hand, prayer can also be used as a way to cope with stress (Whittington & Scher, 2010). Understanding how prayer affects the person's wellbeing may help counsellors gain more awareness into how religious clients cope with stress (Whyte, 2017). It all depends on the content of

the prayer: prayer has positive effects on mental wellbeing when it focuses on being thankful and expressing a desire to get closer to God (Whittington & Scher, 2010). However, if prayer consists of asking God for things, it may harm mental wellness (Whittington & Scher, 2010). Participants remarked that they experienced a sense of serenity in God's presence. Praying seems to have a calming effect on believers (Whyte, 2017). A reason behind this effect may be that, when one prays, they are reflecting on what is creating such negative feelings in their life. Paying attention to emotions helps individuals to put them in perspective and understand their cause (Whyte, 2017). Praying consists of a process which, I suspect, is rather similar to what is done in counselling, that of addressing feelings and their roots (Whittington & Scher, 2010). Additionally, prayer seems to help people exercise more self-control, as through prayer, people become more aware of themselves and how they are relating to others (Friesea & Wänkeb, 2014). Bremner, Koole, and Bushman (2011) conclude that praying for someone could reduce aggression and anger.

Finding Meaning in Difficulties

One participant claimed that his life was meaningless before he experienced a hardship and started a relationship with God. This was a common thread in the interviews. Finding purpose in life is one of the primary interests of humans (Taylor, 2013). Thus, it may come as no surprise that most participants talked about their relationship with God helping them to find their own life purpose. Adler (1929) states that having a purpose drives individuals to realise their potential. Indeed, participants felt that God helped them recognise their purpose in life, and this helped them get through challenging situations. It could be that having God in their life might have made the participants feel

special, and eventually this might have instigated a desire to live a better life with better spiritual wellbeing (Fisher, 2015). This might have transformed the pain experienced into a valuable life lesson (Lazarus, 2000). Notably, Lazarus (2000) suggests that, when a person finds meaning in a difficult situation, the pain becomes more tolerable and even useful. More important than finding meaning is pursuing the dream that gives meaning to their lives (Kang & Kim, 2011). Additionally, people who believe in achieving their meaning in life experience a more positive outlook of life, self-respect, dignity and satisfaction (Kang & Kim, 2011).

In conjunction with the purpose of life, the theme of God's calling was prominent across all interviews. God's calling does not necessarily imply living a religious life, but also a vocation for a type of job or profession (Hernandez, Foley, & Beitin, 2011). It is claimed that, in many parts of the Bible, God calls people for particular jobs and gives them guidance. Thus, God leads people to different occupations (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993). This made me wonder whether these teachings, also taught in Catechism, have influenced participants throughout their life, since they were all brought up in a Christian environment. A possible benefit of this perception is that, when one includes God in their career decision-making process, people address existential questions, potentially leading to a career path that truly matters for them (Dik, 2015). This finding is significant for guidance counsellors working with Christian clients who might desire to keep God's calling in their framework whilst deciding what to do in life. Approaching work with a sense of calling affects the extent to which one feels they achieved their life purpose (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Consequently, if one uses one's occupation to help others, this may lead the

person to feel good about themselves and ultimately to an enhanced mental wellbeing (Duffy & Dik, 2013).

Sense of Belonging

Since adolescents have a great need to be part of a group (Kuo & Yang, 2017), it came as no surprise to me that all of the participants stated that they benefitted from being part of a Christian community whilst coping. A sense of belonging occurs as a result of acceptance within a group, and this is one of a human being's basic needs (Hall, 2014). One can be part of several groups, such as family, friends, church, and social media (Hall, 2014). Being part of a community provides its members with a sense of identification, a place where they feel that they fit and belong (Spinks, 2013). This made me think that since youth may be in a state of finding oneself, having a group that helps them explore one's identity may be crucial at this developmental stage. Moreover, the idea of being part of a community is particularly significant in a Maltese culture that values community and solidarity (Psaila, 2012). Being surrounded by trustworthy people may create a sense of emotional safety for each member (Spinks, 2013). Once again, this reminded me that, during the adolescence period, the opinion of others, particularly peers', becomes a growing concern (World Health Organisation, 2018). For this reason, feeling emotionally safe may be of great benefit for youth. Community may offer support and often may act as a buffer during hardship, and this may be one of the reasons why participants found comfort in their Christian community (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2006).

Christian Youth Groups

Since participants mentioned their active role in Christian youth groups, it may be worth trying to understand what such groups offer youngsters, in order to offer counsellors with further awareness about young Christian clients' culture. According to the Malta Catholic Youth Network (2018), there are more than a hundred Catholic youth groups in Malta. Youth groups' main aims are to create spaces where youth can enjoy themselves and to engage youth and their families in a deeper relationship with God and the church (Snell, 2009). One of the reasons for youth being part of religious groups may be that, at this stage, they are more able to have an understanding of a personal God and this might instigate a curiosity about such phenomena (Dell & Fowler, 2010). Since many religious youth groups organise events, individuals may also have the opportunity to learn specific skills such as time-management, organisational, and team-work skills (King, 2018). Most importantly, due to the small environment, religious youth groups may offer a space for a hurt adolescent to regain his or her confidence, especially if they struggle with being a part of the wider community (King, 2018). The study done with Sudanese refugee youth shows that organisations such as Church and youth groups generated resources of intercultural competence for quicker acculturation (Wilkinson, Santoro, & Major, 2017). Ultimately, youth groups offer significant friendships that may offer a substitute family (Pica-Smith & Poynton, 2015). In such cases, counsellors should support positive group contact, for example through group counselling, in order to reduce racial prejudice and bullying, have higher levels of social competence and self-esteem (Pica-Smith & Poynton, 2015).

The Need for a Mediator between God and Person

When participants were angry with, or doubted, God, they turned to religious people such as spiritual directors for help. The aim of spiritual direction is to provide people with the space to express their experience of God (Evans, 2015). Participants stated that they sought a priest or a lay person who is on a spiritual journey when they felt the lack of God's presence in their life. One of the saints within the Catholic Church, St. Teresa of Avila (1904), remarks that God designed us to be dependent on others for our spiritual growth. In a similar vein, Pronechen (2012) states that people who desire God in their life need a companion for guidance, reassurance and affirmation in their relationship with God. Additionally, spiritual directors may help people to understand God's purpose for their life particularly in difficult periods in their life (Foster, 2009). Most importantly, a priest or a lay person has the opportunity to support the individual who is feeling lost in that particular moment in life by providing accompaniment (Pronechen, 2012). This may lead to healthier wellbeing due to qualities of feeling understood and accepted (Pronechen, 2012). I believe that this finding sheds light on some Christian clients' need to have a spiritual companion, whilst also highlighting the difference between the counselling profession and spiritual direction.

Spiritual Direction and Counselling

Gubi (2011) concludes, from his research, that counselling and spiritual accompaniment are similar in the nature of encounter between the client and the counsellor or spiritual director, and in the skills needed for a relationship to happen, such as active listening and empathy. Participants in Psaila's (2014) study perceived both spirituality and psychotherapy as being transformative,

and thus could move a person towards change and growth. Nonetheless, one of the main differences is that spiritual accompaniment has professional deficits, such as a lack of psychological training and infrequent supervision (Gubi, 2011). Whilst emotional difficulties and fears could lead to growth in holiness, certain fears such as severe anxiety and depression, might be beyond the spiritual director's expertise. In such cases, the client might benefit from counselling sessions (Ricciardi, 2014). Ideally, the counsellor and spiritual director would work collaboratively, with the client's permission, to reduce distress and attempt to heal the root of the problem (Ricciardi, 2014). According to some authors (e.g. Ricciardi, 2014), forgiveness is required for a lasting healing of deep wounds; this could be further explored with a spiritual director. Ultimately, one might conclude that counsellors need to become more aware of the specific characteristics of spiritual accompaniment, in order to help clients on a holistic understanding and management of existential or spiritual crisis (Williams, 2015).

Spiritual Aspect in Counselling

This study highlighted the notion that a relationship with God was beneficial for participants to cope during their hardships in life. As the transcendental relationship offered resilience to the participants, it may be beneficial for the counselling profession to explore further this notion (Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013). Spiritual identity development has been neglected in counselling training and this may lead counsellors to feel unskilled in this area, especially when it comes to understand the effects of having a transcendental relationship (Plumb, 2011). A more serious problem arises when religious clients are hindered from discussing religious or spiritual issues that they

consider important for their growth (Plumb, 2011). Bartoli (2007) concluded

that, whether or not clients share about their religion or spirituality, it depends

on their perception of therapists' inclination to discuss such topic. To this end,

multicultural competence has been introduced in academic writing and

counselling training over the past few years (Sue & Sue, 2007. This suggests

that therapists should have multicultural knowledge, skills, and awareness to be

aware of their own biases, cultural issues in diverse clients and to bridge

potential differences between therapists and clients (Lu, 2017). Should this not

happen, it may result in negative effects of racial and ethnic differences, such

as the client feeling unsafe to disclose about their identity (Magaldi & Trub,

2016). In such cases, it may be important for counsellors to acknowledge and

address racial and ethnic disparities (Magaldi & Trub, 2016).

This made me think about the absence of spirituality in many of the initial

assessments counsellors have with clients, which may indicate little importance

attributed to this area (Daniels & Fitzpatrick, 2013). Moreover, this may

unintentially give a message to clients that religion and spirituality are not

relevant aspects in counselling, thus hindering them from disclosing any

meaning that religion and spirituality might have for them (Daniels & Fitzpatrick,

2013). Additionally, clients may present issues of religious introjections, and

counselling may help them strengthen their spirituality whilst becoming

psychologically healthier (Psaila, 2014). When clients find comfort in a

relationship with God, it is important that counsellors use the client's religious

beliefs to assist them in their experience (Matise, Ratcliff, & Mosci, 2018). For

the reasons mentioned, this study sheds light on the importance that should be

given to the spiritual aspect, as some clients find comfort in transcendental relationships in times of distress.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the super-ordinate themes have been discussed in relation to existing research. Furthermore, personal thoughts about the findings were included, whilst keeping in mind the potential implications for the counselling profession. The next chapter collates an overall conclusion of the study, together with recommendations for future research and the limitations of the study.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how attachment with God affected youth whilst experiencing a difficult situation. The intent of this chapter is to give a brief summary of the key research findings and their implications for the counselling profession. Additionally, the limitations of this study will be discussed, along with recommendations for further research and practise.

Summary of the Key Research Findings

While research on spirituality and counselling has increased over the years, studies that focus on the experience of local youngsters are few. Furthermore, due to the centrality of religion in the Maltese society, one cannot underestimate the influence of religion and spirituality on Maltese clients (Psaila, 2012). These were the reasons inspiring this study.

The primary aim of this study was to explore if a transcendental relationship affects people whilst undergoing a hardship in life. A secondary aim of the research was to understand youth's perception of having a relationship with God and how it affected them in their life. It was hoped that the research would elucidate potential coping features originating from the relationship with God, which would generate further understandings for counsellors. Since I desired to understand how each participant constructed their world regarding the phenomenon, a qualitative phenomenological approach was deemed suitable for this study (McLeod, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from four females and four males, aged between 18 and 30. The eight participants disclosed how they experienced God and how this relationship affected their perception of life, particularly during difficult situations in their past. Data was analysed using Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). This yielded eight inter-related themes, reflecting participants' perceptions of having a relationship with God and its effects. Themes were thoroughly discussed in the light of existing research.

It was interesting to note that all of the participants in this study pointed out the discrepancies they see between the church and God. This theme brought out that the church, especially in village parishes, depicts a judgmental God that leaves participants feeling shattered and uncomfortable with their sense of self. On the other hand, when participants experienced a personal relationship with God, they experienced him as loving and merciful, which helped them cope with their hardships. This finding may be helpful for counsellors who are working with clients dealing with the potentially negative effects of such dichotomy, including the impact on the client's sense of self. A significant finding was the psychological harm the church was experienced as having perpetrated on a homosexual participant. Thus, this research may help counsellors understand the difficulties Maltese homosexual clients, who have been brought up in a Catholic environment, may be going through. Additionally, this finding gives a better understanding of the fact that people might perceive the entity of the church and God differently. This research also suggests that Catholic teachings may have affected participants' moral development. The term *conscience* emerged, which referred to their inner voice guiding them regarding what is right from wrong. This finding may be crucial to gain deeper understanding of clients who might be dealing with guilt due to their 'conscience'; this may lead counsellors to have better awareness of the kind of conscience one might have.

Another significant discovery was around youth perceiveing God as an attachment figure. The suffering they experienced triggered them to seek God and maintain a relationship with him. According to the participants, this relationship offered them meaning in their suffering; indeed, they felt that their attachment with God eased their pain, and helped them find ways to learn from their sorrows. It can be said that their negative events were reinterpreted in a positive way which affected the way they recuperated from their stressful situation (Krok, 2015). Several characteristics were attributed to God as a caregiver. God was perceived as powerful and a safe haven. Consequently, participants felt the need to maintain proximity with him. These characteristics are similar to the ones Bowlby's (1969) study pointed out for an attachment bond to occur. Findings from this study also seemed to mirror Kirkpatrick's (1998) findings suggesting that the attachment with God has a similar attachment framework to that of caregivers. The transcendental attachment seemed to provide participants with a feeling that they are not alone during their suffering, and that someone cares about their pain (Peteet, 2001). The relationship with God affected their cognitive and emotional processes to cope with the given situation (Pargament et al., 2013). This notion may be useful for the counselling profession, in that it places importance on the need for counsellors to explore their clients' relationship with God in more depth, rather than rely on potentially stereotypical understandings. It is also useful to bear in mind that clients might have varying attachment styles with God.

An intriguing finding is that participants felt they found their purpose in life through their relationship with God. This may lead to a more satisfied life and a healthier wellbeing (Kang & Kim, 2011). This data can help counsellors

remain open to the potential benefits on mental wellbeing when clients believe that they found their meaning in life through God. For participants in this study, it was very important that they understood what God was calling them to do in their life. Dik (2015) stated that keeping God in one's career decision-making process might help answer existential questions, potentially leading to a more fulfilling life. Guidance counsellors may want to bear this in mind when working with clients who desire to keep God in their career decision-making process. Throughout this research study, the importance for youth to be part of a community was accentuated. This is an important factor in the mental health profession, as being part of a community creates a sense of emotional safety, which is instrumental in helping people cope with difficulties which results to healthier wellbeing (Spinks, 2013). Participants came to the conclusion that there was a need for a mediator between God and man. This need developed from experiences that alienated participants from God, due to doubts and anger. This led to a discussion of spiritual direction and counselling. The counselling profession might find it useful to become more aware of the potential importance of spiritual accompaniment for clients; indeed, this might be considered as an extension of their attachment with God.

Recommendations for Future Research and Counselling Practice

This research study is important for the counselling profession as it provides information to counsellors about different experiences of individuals, together with their coping strategies especially that of youth. It highlights the way some individuals consider God as their secure attachment figure and that this relationship provides them with resilience. Moreover, this study brings out the notion that spirituality needs to be considered further in the counselling

field. Hearing youths' experience on having a relationship with God made me wonder on whether these thoughts were ever shared with their counsellors. For this reason, an interesting study would be on how youth experience the disclosure of their relationship with God in counselling. In conjunction with this, it would also be worth trying to understand whether counsellors consider other means of coping, aside from the traditional ones for example, a relationship with God. Since, in this study, God is perceived as an attachment figure, I believe that when counsellors are exploring religious clients' attachment figures, their relationship with God needs to be taken into account or at least considered in order to understand their way of coping. This is also the case for initial assessments, where the spiritual element of a client's life is sometimes not addressed and this can give an indication on their coping strategies (Daniels & Fitzpatrick, 2013). As I draw towards the end of my Masters in Counselling course, I realise that training in the spiritual aspect was limited. This may have led to a lack of reflection on the spiritual dimension of counselling, thus missing out on a potentially vital aspect of one's human experience (Lu, 2017). As counsellors, not being aware of this feature may lead us to possibly impose our own ideas of spirituality onto others, or even excluding our clients' spiritual needs (Magaldi & Trub, 2016). Thus, I recommend that a more holistic approach is adopted for the training of future Maltese counsellors.

Limitations of the Study

From the beginning of this process, every effort was done to present high quality research. In spite of this, every research has its limitations, which I will now discuss. When I drew up my research question, I desired to have

participants with different religious beliefs. However, all those who were interested in the study considered themselves Christian. Whilst a homogeneous sample provides a better way to focus on a meaning-making process (Cohen, 2006), it nevertheless offers a limited picture of youth in Malta, particularly in light of the increase in international youth, which may portray God in a different way (Martin, 2017). It may thus be important to consider further research with non-Maltese participants who are permanently living in Malta. The research data in this qualitative study is based on the lived experiences of Maltese youth and one Asian participant who resides in Malta. Hence, this research largely reflects the Maltese culture milieu, which may not be transferable to other settings. Another limitation may have been my background as an active member of a religious congregation, which may have hindered participants to open up about negative experiences with God. However, I made sure that when this was felt through the participants' non-verbals or discourse, I addressed it and always tried to hold a non-judgmental approach.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this research process, I have noticed myself transforming holistically. As a researcher, I observed my constant struggle to be analytical and not let my beliefs overcome the participants' voice. It was crucial for me to stay as true as possible to what each participant shared with me. This was not always done effortlessly, especially when core beliefs were not aligned with mine. Nevertheless, the reflexive training given during the counselling course helped me reflect on what was being stirred inside me, which undoubtedly helped me in the process of becoming a better counsellor. The spiritual journeys that the participants generously shared, made me reflect on my

spiritual life and the role it has had in my management of different phases in my life. I reflected on the way I perceive having a relationship with God, and how it impacted my management of challenging times. Most importantly I reflected on how I am addressing my clients' spiritual ways of coping and if enough importance is being dedicated to this. Finally, this journey served as a reflection on aspects that make up my identity, keeping in mind the power and privileges that I have, together with the oppressions I experience. I reflected on the extent to which my management of challenging situations has contributed to the development of my identity. My relationship with God, with its ebbs and flows, was a constant throughout the process, engendering in me a way of coping that contributes to my being a counsellor and person. All in all, this research process has helped me become more aware of a holistic identity, which in turn will support me in becoming a better counsellor and researcher.

Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form

Consent Form (English version)

Name of Researcher: Jeanine Balzan Engerer (119191m)

Email/s: jeanineengerer@gmail.com

Title of dissertation:

How attachment with God impacts on youth's management of life situations.

Statement of purpose of the study:

I will be exploring how the attachment with God has impacted the youth's management during challenging life situations.

Methods of data collection: Individual audio-recorded semi-structured interviews

Use made of the information: For dissertation research purposes only.

With this Consent Form, I Jeanine Balzan Engerer, promise to keep to the following conditions throughout the whole research process. I will abide by the following conditions:

Your real name/identity will not be used at any point in the study and you have the option to choose your own pseudonym.

You are free to withdraw yourself from the study at any point in time and for whatever reason without there being any consequences. In the case that you withdraw, all records and information collected will be destroyed.

There will be no deception in the data collection process of any form.

The interview will be audio-recorded.

The recording will be destroyed one year after the research process has come to an end.

A copy of the research will be handed to you through a CD or as a hard copy at your request.

Participant

I, (name of participant) _____ agree to the conditions.

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Formola ta' Kunsens (verżjoni bil-Malti)

<u>Isem ir-Riċerkatur:</u>   Jeanine Balzan Engerer (119191m)

<u>Indirizz Elettroniku:</u> jeanineengerer@gmail.com

<u>Titlu tad-dissertazzjoni:</u>

How attachment with God impacts on youth's management of life situations

<u>Dikkjarazzjoni tal-iskop tal-istudju:</u>

Jien ser nesplora l-erperjenzi taz-zgħazagħ kif ħarsu lejn ir-relazzjoni tagħhom m'Alla waqt li kienu għaddejjin minn sitwazzjonijiet diffiċli li ġġib magħha l-ħajja.

<u>Metodi ta' ġbir tad-dejta:</u> Intervisti individwali semistrutturati u rrekordjati b'mod awdjo.

<u>Kif ser tintuza l-informazzjoni:</u> Bi skop ta' riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni biss.

L-isem reali/l-identità tiegħek m'huma ser jintużaw f'ebda stadju tal-istudju u inti għandek il-possibbiltà li tagħżel il-psewdonimu tiegħek.

Inti liberu/libera li tirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe stadju u għal kwalunkwe raġuni mingħajr ma jkun hemm konsegwenzi. Fil-każ li tirtira, ir-rekords u l-informazzjoni kollha miġbura jiġu meqruda.

M'hu se jkun hemm ebda forma ta' qerq fil-proċess tal-ġbir tad-dejta.

L-intervista se tkun irrekordjata b'mod awdjo.

Inti se tingħata kopja tat-transkrizzjoni tiegħek, kif ukoll il-kapitlu dwar ir-riżultati, għar-reazzjonijiet u l-verifika min-naħa tiegħek.

Il-materjal irrekordjat se jinqered sena wara li jkun intemm il-proċess tar-riċerka.

Tingħatalek kopja tar-riċerka fuq CD jew f'għamla stampata fuq talba tiegħek.

<u>Parteċipant</u>

Jien, (isem tal-parteċipant) _____ naqbel mal-kundizzjonijiet.

Firma tal-parteċipant: _____

Data: _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

English Version

1. Can you describe a difficult time in your life where you felt that having an attachment (relationship) with God has affected the way you coped.

2. What type of support did you have during that situation?

3. What image do you have of God?

4. How did you learn about God?

5. How is your relationship with your mother/father?

6. Do you see a connection between the relationship you have with your mother/father and with God?

Verżjoni bil-Malti

1. Tista' tiddeskrivi xi żmien diffiċli f'ħajtek fejn ħassejt li l-attachment (ir-relazzjoni) tiegħek ma' Alla affetwat il-mod li bih kampajt?

2. X'tip ta' għajnuna kellek matul din is-sitwazzjoni?

3. Xi stampa għandek ta' Alla?

4. Kif tgħallimt fuq Alla?

5. Kif inhi r-relazzjoni tiegħek ma' ommok/missierek?

6. Tara konnessjoni bejn ir-relazzjoni li għandek ma' ommok/missierek u dik ma' Alla?

Appendix C: General Information

General Information (English version)

Dear Sir/Madam,

I hope this email finds you well. I am Jeanine Balzan Engerer a trainee counsellor reading a masters at the University of Malta. Part of my Masters in Counselling coursework includes a dissertation. I will be exploring how attachment with God impacts on youth's management of life situations, under the supervision of Dr. Marlene Cauchi. In order to address the research question, a qualitative approach has been chosen and I would need six to eight participants aged between 18 and 35 years old who are willing to share about how they perceived the attachment with God during difficult times in their life. The inclusion criteria are as follows: the participant needs to be aged between 18 and 35. At least two years have passed since the difficult situation has happened. Finally, the participant feels that the attachment with God has influenced (both positive and negative) him/her whilst going through hard times.

The interview will last approximately an hour and will be audio-recorded and transcribed. After I have analysed all the information and the dissertation process is complete (a year from completion), I will destroy the recordings. I would appreciate it if you were to distribute the attached recruitment letter and consent forms to your members. Please note that:

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and one is free to decline participation.

All the collected raw data will only be seen by myself and my supervisor/advisor

Anonymity will be respected and identities will not be disclosed at any point.

Participants have the right to not answer any questions they would not like to answer.

Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide an explanation for your withdrawal. Their data would then not be used.

Participants will be given their transcripts and later on the results chapter to review and verify (Audit trail), as well as a copy of the study once the correction process is complete.

Should you have any queries, please call me on 79834203 or contact me at jeanineengerer@gmail.com and I will be very happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you for your time, support and consideration.

Yours truly,

Jeanine Balzan Engerer

Informazzjoni Generali (verżjoni bil-Malti)

Għażiż/a,

Jiena Jeanine Balzan Engerer, *trainee counsellor* u qed naħdem fuq *masters* fl-Università ta' Malta. Parti mill-ħidma tiegħi għal dan il-kors tinkludi dissertazzjoni. Jien ser nesplora l-esperjenzi taż-żgħażagħ kif ħarsu lejn ir-relazzjoni m'Alla waqt li kienu qed jgħaddu minn sitwazzjonijiet diffiċli li ġġib il-ħajja magħha. Din ser issir taħt is-supervizjoni ta Dott. Marlene Cauchi. Sabiex nindirizza l-mistoqsija tar-riċerka, għażilt l-approwċ kwalitattiv u ser inkun neħtieġ minn tlitt sa tminn zghazagh sabiex jieħdu sehem f'din ir-riċerka. Il-kriterji tal-inklużjoni huma dawn: iż-żgħażagħ irid ikollhom bejn 18 u 35 u jixtiequ jaqsmu l-esperjenza tagħhom. Ta' l-anqas, sentejn irridu jkunu għaddew minn meta is-sitwazzjoni diffiċli tkun grat. Finalment, il-partecipant/a irid/trid jkun/tkun jħoss/tħoss li r-relazzjoni m'Alla affetwatu/ha b'xi mod (kemm pożitiv u kemm negattiv) waqt li kien/kienet għaddej/jja mill-mumenti diffiċli.

L-intervista ddum madwar siegħa u se tiġi rrekordjata b'mod awdjo u transkritta. Wara li nkun analiżżajt l-informazzjoni kollha u l-proċess tad-disertazzjoni jkun mitmum (sena wara t-tmiem), jien neqred il-materjal irrekordjat. Napprezza jekk inti tqassam l-ittra ta' rekrutaġġ u l-formoli ta' kunsens mehmuża lill-membri tiegħek. Jekk jogħġbok, innota li:

Il-parteċipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija kompletament volontarja u kulħadd huwa liberu li jirrifjuta li jieħu sehem.

Id-dejta kollha mhux ipproċessata se narawha biss jien u s-superviżur/konsulent tiegħi.

L-anonimità se tiġi rrispettata u l-identitajiet m'huma ser jinkixfu f'l-ebda stadju.

Il-parteċipanti jkollhom id-dritt li ma jwiġbux kwalunkwe mistoqsija li ma jixtiqux iwieġbu.

Il-parteċipanti jistgħu jirtiraw mill-istudju meta jridu mingħajr ma jagħtu spjegazzjoni għala rtiraw. Id-dejta tagħhom imbagħad ma tintużax.

Il-parteċipanti ser jingħataw it-transkrizzjoni tagħhom u aktar tard il-kapitlu dwar ir-riżultati sabiex jirreaġixxu għalih u jivverifikawħ (rekord tal-awditjar), kif ukoll kopja tal-istudju la darba jkun intemm il-proċess tat-tiswija.

Jekk tkun tixtieq tiċċara xi ħaġa, jekk jogħġbok, ċempilli jew ikkuntattjani fuq 79834203 jew jeanineengerer@gmail.com u nwieġeb il-mistoqsijiet tiegħek bil-qalb kollha. Grazzi tal-ħin, tal-appoġġ u tal-konsiderazzjoni tiegħek.

Tislijiet,

Jeanine Balzan Engerer

Appendix D: Transcripts

Chloe	TRANSCRIPT	Transformation into themes
Forsi tgħidli daqsxejn ftit fuqek? Fuqek bħala persuna. Stinkajt ħafna għaliha!	Fuqi in general? Ok. Għandi 19, għandi żewġ ħuti, għandi kelba. Bħala hobbies nagħmel scrap booking, as in ir-ritratti, I compile them flimkien u affarjiet qishom ta' memorja ngħidilom jien. Inħobb ħafna l-familja as in, in-nanna tiġi toqgħod magħna għal ħafna żmien. Nagħmel voluntary work so ħafna mill-ħin ikun dedicated għal hekk. Niltaqa' mal-boyfriend u ma' sħabi. Qiegħda mediċina u qiegħda vera happy għax vera stinkajt, like għamilt sena barra biex, imbagħad qaluli li m'għaddejtx! Imbagħad għamilt revision of paper u indunaw li ħadu żball so xeba hassle.	Her life Family Full life Altruism Friendships Struggle Greater satisfaction

Elizabeth	TRANSCRIPT	Transformation into themes
Forsi tgħidli daqsxejn fuqek, forsi x'ħajjrek biex tipparteċipa f'din it-teżi. U x'ħajjrek li taċċeta, li you actually do it?		
	Jisimni Elizabeth, Għandi 22, qiegħda l-Universita' u ħabiba tiegħi fil-course staqsietni li kienet taf b'din ir-riċerka u staqsietni jekk nitħajjarx nieħu sehem. Kien hemm parti minnha l-fatt li jien għaddejja bħalissa mit-teżi tiegħi u jiena ukoll kelli bżonn insaqsi lil sħabi biex jgħinuni allura ħassejtni qisni mela nista' nagħti lil xi ħadd ieħor. U meta qrajt it-titlu u qrajt anke fuq xiex ħa tkun din ir-riċerka kienet xi ħaġa li interessatni u qisni kont kurjuża anke ta' kif jista' jkun tiżvolġi 'l quddiem din ir-riċerka.	Felt obliged to participate Giving back Wanted to help others Curious
Iġifiri, bejn ħassejtek obligata għax taf xi tfisser meta tfittex parteċipanti, bejn kont kurjuża fuq dan it-title.		
	Ija eżatt.	

Pawlu	TRANSCRIPT	Transformation into themes
Kif taf qed infittex, qed nagħmel studju kif iż-żgħażagħ iħossu li r-relazzjoni m'Alla affetwathom b'xi mod, kemm fil-pożittiv u kemm fin-negattiv. Għalhekk, jekk forsi tista' tibda titkellem daqsxejn fuq it-tip ta' relazzjoni li int tħoss li għandek m'Alla.	Emm… (pause) Ara, qisu sentejn ilu kelli l-aċċident u speċi ta', wara li kelli aċċident bażikament tajritni karozza u spiċċajt l-isptar. Bejn tara lill-ġenituri tiegħek ee, bid-dmugħ f'għajnejhom, bejn tibda tara l-ħbieb vera tiegħek min huma, għax huma dawn in-nies li speċi jibdew jiġu l-isptar, mhux jiġu darba biss imma tarhom jibdew jiġu konsistenti tipo jsaqsuk, jibgħatulek fuq facebook forsi u hekk.	Who can he trust? Traumatic experience Love of parents Emotional pain Loyalty Physical pain Shock Without direction
	Emm, imma naħseb jiena qabel ma kont, ma kelli l-aċċident, jien nara lili li kont ngħix ħajti naqra emm, aktar ta' mhux happy go lucky imma aktar ta' x'jimpurtani mill-ħajja jew x'jimpurtani minn hekk. Iġifieri, qisni wara qisu 4-5 months ta' recovery period bil-krozzi, ndur ma' kuġinuwi kullimkien u jieħdu paċenzja bija, jiena qisni skoprejt speċi ta' l-imħabba t'Alla through… through nies bħala familjari u through eżempju speċjalment kuġinuwi, għax l-aktar wieħed li dar bija, speċi ta' offra l-ħin tiegħu	Loved by his cousin Being taken cared of Encountering God's love Committed towards religion Devotion

	anke waqt li avolja kien skola, biex jara li jien nirkupra u nirkupra malajr. Emm, li nista' nara ukoll, speċi ta', illum il-ġurnata, aparti l-quddies ta' nhar ta' Ħadd u hekk, inħossni aktar speċi ta' committed lejn il-ħaġa fis-sens inħossni aktar committed lejn il-knisja u lejn eżempju, jekk tmur quddies, it-talb tisimgħu u tipprova tifhem aktar x'qed jingħad fil-quddies u hekk.	113

Dominic	TRANSCRIPT	Transformation into themes
Dominic, x'ħajjrek biex tipparteċipa f'din it-teżi?	Li ħajjritni hija li għax kienet l-ewwel darba li smajt xi ħadd ifittex fuq *depression* u relazzjoni m'Alla. Jiena għaddejt minn żmien ikrah ħafna meta kelli tfajla li domt magħha u ndunajt li kienet qalbitieli darbtejn. Kont inħossni qiegħed f'dalma, kelli dipressjoni. U hemmhekk jiena ħassejtni ħafna abbandunat minn Alla. Infatti imbagħad spiċċajt ħadt overdose u spiċċajt Mount Carmel. Dak iż-żmien kont nitlob ħafna lil Alla biex jgħini noħroġ minnha. Pero bdejt ninduna li mhux ħa jgħini. Jiena għamilt ħajti *in care* għax ommi kienet mietet u missieri kien abbandunani. U kont ngħix dejjem magħhom. Kont tlift ir-relazzjoni m'Alla sentejn ilu għax kont waqajt f'dipressjoni. U hemm bdejt nitlob biex forsi Alla jgħini biex noħroġ minn din il-problema. U meta ħadt l-overdose u ma rajtx xejn kambjament, għidt ma bdejtx qisni, bdejt ngħid xiż-żikk qed nitlob nagħmel! Ma bdejtx nara kambjament.	Hardships

Mental health and God

Darkness

Cheated on

Depression

Abandoned by God
Unhelpful God

Brought up in a Christian residential home

Depression & God

Pleading to God

Overdose

Doubts in sacraments |

	U bdew jiġuni ħafna ħsibijiet bħal per eżempju l-ostja, jekk inti tiblha, x'se taffetwalek ħajtek? Jew qisa laqtitni l-qrar, jekk inti mort tqer u terġa tirrepeti l-istess dnubiet, xi tmur tagħmel tqer?	115

Mark	TRANSCRIPT	Transformation into themes
Tista' tibda billi tiddeskrivi fid-dettal, l-esperjenza jew żmien partikolari fejn ħassejt li r-relazzjoni m'Alla affetwatek bil-mod kif ikkowpjajt.	Tajjeb, mela kien hemm diversi fażijiet f'ħajti fejn nirrekorri lejn Alla. Twelidt ġo familja li tagħti kas ħafna l-knisja, kont abbati, tista' tgħid li dejjem kont spiritwali bħala bniedem. Pero qisu Alla kien ikun dejjem hemm, qisek *one of the extras*, qiegħed hemm *plus* hemm għoxrin elf ħaġa oħra. Imma qiegħed hemm u qisek kultant tmur il-quddies tagħmel present u daqshekk. Qisek għandek it-*to-do-list* u hu waħda minnhom. U qatt ma fhimt, kemm jista' veru jħalli impatt Alla jew il-preżenza tiegħu f'ħajtek. U qatt ma ħsibt fiha. Qatt ma ħsibt li xi darba jkolli bżonn dik is-security li tiġi kważi kważi dipendenti fuqu. U madwar tlett snin ilu kont f'relazzjoni ma' ġuvni u qatt ma kienet sejra tajjeb dir-relazzjoni. U jiena minħabba li kienet l-ewwel relazzjoni tiegħi, kont ħriġt *out*, kienet saret taf il-familja, kien daħal id-dar. Allura, miegħu ġew ħafna *new beginnings*, allura, jien lilu kont idolizzajtu kważi. Kien l-idolu	Go to God Turn to God Security from God Dependent on God Homosexuality Vulnerable

	tiegħi, *plus* li kont inħobbu, *plus* li kont ridt nqatta' ħajti miegħu anke jekk jittrattani ħażin. U bdejt, insomma *whatever*, ir-relazzjoni ma kinitx sejra tajjeb imma dejjem kont naf li mhux sejra tajjeb, imma qisni bqajt nikkonvinċi lili nnifsi li r-relazzjoni sejra tajjeb.	117

Emily	TRANSCRIPT	Transformation into themes
Jekk tista' tgħid xi ħaġa fuqek.	Ma nafx dil-mistoqsija dejjem tħawwadni, niddeskrivi lili nnifsi. Għandi dsatax-il sena, nistudja l-Universita' ta' Malta, inqatta' ħafna ħin l-oratorju. Bażikament dak bħalissa f'ħajti.	About herself Student life
U x'ħajrek tipparteċipa f'din it-teżi?	Ma nafx eżatt. L-ewwel nett, x'ħin rajt il-post xtaqt ngħin *anyway*, li stajt u ma nafx hekk naħseb rajtha bħala opportunita' biex forsi nitkellem fuq xi ħaġa li ma tantx titkellem fuqa qisu.	Desire to help Desire to open up Opportunity to help
Qisu għandek xi ħaġa f'ħajtek li ma tantx tesprimiha lin-nies u taħseb li din tkun opportunita' li titkellem.	Jiena *in generali* ma tantx inħobb nesprimi ruħi man-nies, ma tantx inħobb nuri l-problemi tiegħi u niddejjaq niftaħ qalbi. Allura, qisni forsi rajtha bħala opportunita' li nibda vjaġġ. Għax issa *as in I came to terms with the situation* allura, għidt ma nafx, ħassejtni aktar komda forsi nitkellem fuqha.	Bottling up emotions Desire to change Can open up Feeling safe now Accepting the difficult situation
Hekk kont ħa nsaqsik, iġifieri x'ġara fik li tak il-kuraġġ li *you actually* issaqsi biex titkellem fuq din l-istorja meta tgħid li inti persuna riservata?	Naħseb dik hi, qisni aċċetajtha. *As in* għaddejt minn ħafna żmien li kont naħseb li forsi s-sitwazzjoni li ġrat kienet tort tiegħi. U li għamilt xi ħaġa ħażina jiena. Imma naħseb issa fl-aħħar mill-aħħar qisni	

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	irrealizzajt li jiena pruvajt minn kollox biex nirranġa s-sitwazzjoni, ma tranġatx, mhux tort tiegħi, imma tort ta' nies oħra.	

Joshua	TRANSCRIPT	Transformation into themes
Would you like to start by telling me about yourself?	So, my name is Joshua and I am a foreigner and I was a professional banker so I used to stock valuation, that is, basically doing stock evaluations for stocks listed on your stock exchange. But then I had a very good career, did very well in life, many of my dreams fulfilled and life was good. I have loving parents, I have loving siblings and then (hehh) I just felt God challenging me and asking me to let go of everything and I let go. I didn't know what he was asking me to let go and why and he told me to let go of the career, let go your life and I want you to become a priest, and I said ok and here I am studying theology in Malta.	About himself His life before giving up Had a good life Letting go of his life
How was it for you during that time when you heard a calling from God when you felt you had to let go of everything you have been working hard for?		Meeting God
	So it has been in different stages in my life, so the first time when I had deep encounter with God when what I mean is like a deep encounter is	Who God really is

	like it's called a retreat where a person goes and experiences who God really is and not on what God is like. Ok I know God is there and he can save me but to really know what can happen in my life if I don't have God and what can happen in my life if I have God in my life.	

Appendix E: Participants' Narratives

Pawlu

Pawlu is a 21-year-old student who sought God when he was recovering from a tragic accident. Even though he was brought up in a Christian family and attended a religious youth centre for all of his life, it was only after the accident that he started thinking about the significance of having a relationship with God. When he was 18 years old, he spent over six months recovering from a car accident. During this time, he experienced many feelings; loneliness, devastation and appreciation to name a few. He said, that when he realised that no one could help him due to the severity of the condition, he turned to God to ask for help. Pawlu associated God's love with his family, especially his father and cousin. Following this accident, his life perspective changed completely. He started searching for the positive aspect in each situation. Moreover, he came to an understanding that life is short and this encouraged him to seek fulfilling experiences. In order to do so, he asked a priest for accompaniment to explore God's plans for him. Nowadays, he feels that he can trust his life completely to God and this has reduced his anxiety levels.

Mark

Mark, a 25-year-old male, shared that when he came out as homosexual, he felt judged by the church. Nonetheless, he still experienced a deep and loving relationship with God. He was brought up in a religious environment, attended a church school and was an active altar boy until his late teenage years. The first time he felt that he experienced God, though, was when he pleaded God for help after his first break-up which happened when he was 20-years-old. Through this experience, he stated that he constantly feels safe in his life, as

he knows that God is taking care of him. He asks God for help in everyday situations, such as arriving on time for work. Mark is sure that God approves of his sexuality and loves him the way he is. Thus, even though at times he experiences a judgmental church, he continues to practice Christianity. Mark seeks guidance from a priest who he feels comfortable with; he calls him God's messenger.

Dominic

Dominic, who is 22 years old, was brought up in a Christian residential home. His mother died when he was young and his father abandoned him soon after. In his early adolescence, he was adopted and left the residential home, which was experienced as a loss due to the strong bonds he had with the priests at the residential care. It was at this point that he abandoned his religion and focused more on his relationship with his girlfriend. Unfortunately, this relationship resulted in betrayal which devastated Dominic. This situation led him to seek God for help to bring his girlfriend back into his life. God did not fulfil his wish and this made him feel abandoned by God. In order to cope, he self-medicated with alcohol and drugs, however, one day he overdosed. Dominic was admitted to a mental health hospital and according to him this was a dreadful experience. This was a turning point for him where he decided to start therapy in order to get back on his feet. At this point, he asked a priest, who was his godfather, to help him start over with God. Starting a relationship with God was significant for Dominic as he felt guilty for not being in contact with God.

Elizabeth

22-year-old Elizabeth was in charge of a religious youth group. She was chosen out of many to lead this group. Unfortunately, this group was not doing well and she had to take a decision to end the group. This experience created a lot of self-doubt and her anxiety increased. She blamed herself for the groups' failure and spent a lot of time reflecting on this. In this situation, the relationship with God helped her cope with the anxiety. Elizabeth, stated that her relationship with God can never be perfect, as for her no authentic relationship can be that way. She experiences ups and downs with God and struggles to stay in touch. When she is on good terms with God, she feels peaceful and in control of her emotions. On the other hand, when this is not the case, she experiences paranoia and anxiety. Elizabeth seeks guidance from a spiritual director who helps her answer her doubts, regarding herself and her relationship with God.

Jennifer

When Jennifer was 19 years old, she experienced social anxiety and withdrew from society. This happened after she was betrayed by a trustworthy friend. At a point in her life, she was fed up with her situation and decided to accept an invitation to attend a religious group. It was at this place where she experienced a relationship with God for the first time. At her first meeting, Jennifer received a note that said 'Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you'. This statement moved Jennifer and she stated that it was a sign from God not to worry any longer regarding the betrayal. From then onwards, she felt that her anxiety reduced drastically and believes that the reason behind it, is because she feels loved and cared for by God. Jennifer stated that it is important for her

to spend time praying as this reduces her anxious thoughts. Nowadays, Jennifer is in charge of a Christian group and enjoys witnessing other testimonies. She is angry at the fact that the church in Malta has depicted a judgmental God. However, she believes that there are other branches of the church that are working hard to present a loving God to the community.

Emily

Emily is one of the youngest participants in the study. Her biggest concern is that she is not following God's plans and this is creating doubt in every decision that she takes. The desire to follow God's plans may be due to her belief that following the path God prepared for her would be ideal. This statement was underlined when she shared her experience of being abandoned by her closest friends. Emily believes that during that challenging situation in order to cope, God sent her to a religious youth centre and at this place, she experienced authentic friendships. The youth centre was a life changing experience for her, as by having good friends and support from religious people she recuperated from her self-doubts. Emily was brought up in a Christian environment and emphasised that the way her mother spoke about God, influenced the positive perspective she has nowadays. She believes that she has a genuine relationship with God and turns to him in times of distress in order to cope.

Joshua

Joshua is the only foreigner in this study. He is currently living in Malta to pursue his studies in theology. Before deciding to become a priest, he had a successful career in business and giving up his career was hard for him. Joshua stated that he is managing to overcome this challenge, the same way he did in his adolescence, by turning to God for help. During his childhood, he

experienced rejection which led him to feel worthless during most of his adolescence. His turning point was when he attended a religious seminar and the priest who knew his issues invited him to turn to God. At first, he was sceptical about this notion however, he decided to try it out. Joshua believes that his life changed from when he started praying to God to remove the pain he was experiencing due to rejection. He stated that God sent people in his life that loved him the way he is, and this experience helped him cope with the feeling of worthlessness. Joshua noticed that even his personality was changing as he became more loving towards others, even to those who have hurt him which was impossible to do so before.

Chloe

When Chloe was 13 years old, she assisted her father during a cardiac arrest. This was the situation where she felt God taking care of her. She said that God sent her a genuine friend who could listen to her, and this helped her cope with the situation. Feeling supported by her friend, made her feel loved and cared for by God. This feeling made Chloe feel safe and that her situation with her father will resolve. From then onwards, she believes that her relationship with God became stronger and faces any challenge by turning to God for help. Praying to God, is her way of coping with her high levels of anxiety. Chloe stated that she doubts most of the church's' teachings however, seeks guidance from a priest to discuss her thoughts. Chloe, believes that any challenge that we face in life is an opportunity to learn and become a better person. In fact, she looks at her father's episode, as being a situation that helped her understand God's calling for her life, that to become a doctor.

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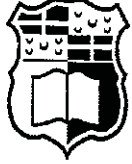Spohn, W. C. (2000). Conscience and Moral Development . *Theological*

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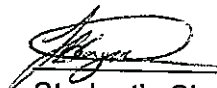
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