

## Investigation of Relationship with God among Adolescents with Conduct Disorder: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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### Abstract

**Objective:** Conduct disorder is characterized by aggressive behavior, cheating or theft, destruction of property, and serious violation of laws before the age of 18. Relationship with God is probably one of the factors that can play a role in preventing delinquent behaviors in individuals with conduct disorder through internal self-control. In this research, we intended to explore the relationship with God among adolescents with conduct disorder.

**Method:** In this study, we used a directed qualitative content analysis research method. We interviewed 9 boys aged 12-17 years who had conduct disorder with or without substance use disorder at a correctional facility in Tehran. We collected the data using a purposive sampling method and continued until data saturation. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The interviews were analyzed using a content analysis method.

**Results:** The boys' relationship with God was analyzed. Three themes were extracted from the interviews: 1) Perception of God, 2) Image of God, and 3) Worship.

**Conclusion:** This study highlighted three main themes: Perception of God, Image of God, and Worship, which shape how adolescents with conduct disorder relate to spirituality. These findings can contribute to the development of culturally appropriate, faith-based therapeutic interventions.

**Key words:** *Conduct Disorder; Object Attachment; Qualitative Research; Religion; Spirituality*

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**M**ental disorders in childhood and adolescence, including conduct disorder, are a public health concern due to their prevalence, early onset, and impact on children, families, and communities (1, 2). Conduct disorder is characterized by aggressive behavior, fraud or stealing, destruction of property, as well as serious violations of the law before the age of 18 (3).

Estimates of the prevalence of conduct disorder vary from region to region (4). However, the overall occurrence rate of this disorder in the world is 8%, namely 11% in men and 7% in women (5). Previous studies have shown the role of genetic and environmental factors in the development of conduct disorder (6, 7). Family socioeconomic disadvantage, maladaptive parental behavior, maternal smoking during pregnancy, and exposure to abuse/violence in childhood are among the environmental risk factors for developing conduct disorder (8, 9).

One of the environmental factors that may have a preventive role against delinquent behavior is the relationship with God and religious beliefs (10). It is almost impossible to discover and punish all wrongdoings of a person, so some people may commit violations secretly. Belief in God can make people feel that they are always being monitored and will be punished if they commit a sin and rewarded if they do a good deed (11).

In the meta-analysis of 62 studies conducted by Kelly *et al.*, it was concluded that being religious has an inverse relationship with delinquent behaviors. It means that the more religious people are, the less likely they are to commit delinquent behavior (12). Also, a meta-analysis of 60 studies showed that religious beliefs and behaviors have a deterrent effect on people's criminal behavior (13). Another systematic review and meta-analysis with 43 studies showed that a higher level of religiosity and spirituality is significantly associated with a lower level of physical and sexual violence (14). By examining students at a school in Malaysia, Ramzy *et al.* showed that there is an inverse relationship between religiosity and delinquent behavior and suggested religiosity as a successful mechanism to prevent delinquent behaviors (15). Therefore, the relationship with God and being religious are probably among the factors that can play a role in preventing the delinquent behavior of people with conduct disorder through internal self-control.

Bowlby's attachment theory addresses the concept of a relationship with God within the field of psychology. Attachment theory is a psychological and evolutionary framework dealing with relationships between humans, especially the importance of early attachments between infants and their primary caregivers (16, 17).

Kirkpatrick and Shaver suggested that the relationship with God can be integrated into the framework of attachment theory (18). Attachment to God refers to the perceived emotional bond between God and the believer, which serves as a measure of safety and comfort, much

like the relationship between a caregiver and an infant or other adult (19, 20). By examining 213 people, Kirkpatrick and Shaver found that certain aspects of adult religiosity, especially belief in God and having a personal relationship with God, can be predicted from the interaction of childhood attachment and parental religiosity (18).

Attachment to God also has a compensatory mechanism, that is, it can compensate for insecure attachment to parents (21). Secure attachment to God is positively related to mental resilience (22), meaning in life (22), and mental health status (23). Also, insecure attachment to God is associated with a hostile-dominant personality style (24) that is positively associated with obsession with death (25). In a study conducted by Salmanian *et al.* on 60 adolescents with conduct disorder, it was concluded that more than half of them had an insecure attachment to God (26). It means that their relationship with God was not safe or comfortable. As mentioned earlier, a relationship with God can be a source of self-controlling. Therefore, one of the reasons for the delinquent behavior of adolescents with conduct disorder is perhaps the lack of safety and comfort in their relationship with God (12, 27). In a study conducted by Ghobari Banab and Kohsar on 100 juvenile delinquents, it was found that the adolescents who understood the presence of God had fewer mental disorders (28). In other studies, it was found that students who have a favorable and positive image of God experience fewer paranoid thoughts and lower levels of depression and anxiety to a lower degree (29, 30). Sinha *et al.* found that adolescent religiosity was associated with reduction of risky behaviors, including smoking, alcohol use, truancy, sexual activity, marijuana use, and depression (31).

Due to the importance of safe attachment to God in reducing delinquent behaviors, various interventions based on faith and spirituality have been formulated during the past decades. Consideration of the image of God in therapy can help mental health professionals and their clients gain valuable insight into the client's inner psychological and relational world, which may improve intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning. Images of God are strongly influenced by early parental relationships. Therefore, these images have a wide therapeutic relevance and potential (32). Such interventions have been able to control delinquent behaviors to some extent. A study of 230 offenders in the Texas prison system showed that a faith-based intervention greatly improved offender behavior (33). Sahare and Kotnala showed that spiritual psychotherapy can improve the conscience of delinquent teenagers (34). It has also been shown that spiritual therapy can reduce the antisocial behavior of prisoners (35).

To reduce delinquent behaviors in people with conduct disorder, protocols for spiritual psychotherapy have been developed, but they have not been significantly effective (36, 37). Moreover, it appears that spiritual interventions may be more effective in certain cultures. For example,

in Iran's predominantly religious society, faith and ritual are interwoven into family life, schools, and public institutions. Individuals, especially in underprivileged neighborhoods, are exposed from early childhood to religious narratives, communal prayers, and moral teachings that shape personal identity and social expectations. This pervasive spiritual atmosphere means that any intervention invoking God, whether through formal classes or informal counseling, is immediately comprehensible and often carries deep cultural legitimacy. Also, in order to develop beneficial faith-based and spiritual interventions, it is necessary to be familiar with different dimensions of the relationship with God in people with conduct disorder. To our knowledge, there have been few studies in this regard. Considering the lack of studies in this field, we decided to explore the relationship with God among adolescents with conduct disorder. The results of this study can be useful for the development of faith-based and spiritual psychotherapy protocols in order to reduce delinquent behaviors in children and adolescents with conduct disorder.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Study Design***

There are different types of qualitative research methods. The researcher should choose the best study plan according to research conditions, including the strengths and limitations of each method. We decided that content analysis was more suitable for conducting this qualitative research. Krippendorff defined content analysis as a technique for drawing reproducible and valid inferences from meaningful cases in their context (38). In contrast to other qualitative research methods, content analysis is not related to a specific science and follows fewer rules, so the risk of confusion in discussions related to concepts and philosophical topics is reduced (39). There are three approaches to content analysis. We used a directed approach in this study. The aim of this approach is to validate or expand the concept of a theoretical framework or theory. Existing theory can help focus research questions (40). We developed the interview questions according to the object relations theory and theory of attachment to God.

### ***Sample and Sampling Method***

The participants were 9 boys at a correctional facility in Tehran who had been diagnosed as having conduct disorder with or without substance use disorder. We used the purposive sampling method, which is suitable for qualitative research (41) and continued until data saturation was reached. The boys were between 12 and 17 years old. The criterion for diagnosing conduct disorder with or without substance use was the semi-structured interview of Kiddie Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia for School-Age Children-Present and Lifetime (K-SADS-P), which was formulated by a psychologist (42). Ghanizadeh *et al.*

reported the reliability of 0.81 and validity of 0.92 for conduct disorder diagnosis by Persian version of K-SADS-PL (43).

### ***Data Collection***

We collected data through in-depth interviews. One of the researchers interviewed each boy in a private meeting. First, the boys were informed about the objectives of the study and informed consent was obtained. Then, the participants were asked about demographic information, including age, parents' marital status, birth order, parents' occupation, level of education, parents' education level, number of siblings, type of crime, history of physical or mental problems, family history of addiction, history of committing crimes, and criminal activity in the family. Open-ended questions were designed for the interview, and the answers to each question led to the next questions. The main questions asked were as follows:

1. How would you describe your relationship with God? Can you explain how your relationship with God was when you were younger?
2. What is your idea of God? Can you tell me how you visualize God? What do you think about Him?
3. How do you establish and maintain a connection with God?

After each main question, according to the answers given by the boys, we asked additional questions to obtain more details. The duration of each interview was 45-70 minutes.

### ***Data Analysis***

We recorded interviews until data saturation. We transcribed the interviews verbatim and subsequently analyzed them. Data analysis was done to extract codes, categories and themes using qualitative content analysis. In this research, we analyzed data as follows:

1. At first, we transcribed the interviews verbatim.
2. Then, we read the narratives several times.
3. We identified the primary codes.
4. After that, we removed duplicate codes and combined codes with similar meaning to create secondary codes.
5. Finally, we grouped secondary codes with similar concepts into the same categories to create themes.

Two authors reviewed the codes and themes at each stage. If there was a difference of opinion at any stage, they would resolve it through consensus.

### ***Data Validation***

We assessed the credibility of the research. To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this study, we did the following:

1. A member survey procedure was applied, and the initial codes were subsequently considered for the responses by participants.
2. Members of the research team assessed the interviews' codes as an internal check, deriving categories for appraising the accuracy of the

coding process and determining whether they used similar codes.

3. Additionally, an external check was performed. The external check was conducted by a professor of psychology who was familiar with the qualitative research method. At this step, the transcripts and results derived from the data were presented to the psychologist; According to the opinion of the external reviewer and with the authors' agreement, irrelevant codes were removed and some secondary codes were changed. In this phase, a comparison of research analysis with relevant studies was conducted by experts, and their feedback enhanced the quality and precision of the analysis (44).

**Ethical Consideration**

This research project was approved by the Research Council of Tehran University of Medical Sciences and confirmed by the ethics committee of the university (ethics code: IR.TUMS.REC.1395.2905). We informed interviewees about the study and obtained their consent for the interviews. They also had the right to withdraw from the interview at any stage. We made sure that the interviewer was not already familiar with the participants and the officials of the correctional facility. The interviewer as well as the members of the research team were committed not to share the participants' information with anyone else, especially the officials of

the correctional facility. The boys were assured that their interview, or their unwillingness to be interviewed, would have no effect on the services they received. Moreover, to ensure anonymity despite the small sample size, all identifiable information such as names, specific locations, and case details were removed from the interview transcripts. Each participant was assigned a code and no demographic or narrative detail was included in the manuscript that could lead to individual identification. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in private settings, and only the research team had access to the original recordings and transcripts. The final reported data were presented in aggregate form, and all quotations were selected carefully to avoid any potential risk of identification.

**Results**

The participants included nine adolescent boys with conduct disorder at a correctional facility in Tehran. Eight of the boys were between 15 and 17 years old, and one of them was less than 15 years old. Also, 5 of them had substance abuse. Demographic information is shown in full in Table 1. These boys mostly lived in poverty and did not have access to amenities. Also, due to the low educational and social levels of their families, most families were not familiar with the needs of children, therefore, the emotional needs of children may not be met by the family.

**Table 1. Themes and Codes Extracted from Interviews with Adolescents with Conduct Disorder**

Themes	Secondary Codes	Primary Codes
Perception of God	Belief in God	Forgetting what God is (before entering the correctional facility) - not believing God in anything (before entering the correctional facility)- not thinking about the existence of God - asking the mother about God (during the childhood) - asking for a sign from God to prove the existence of God (in the correctional facility)- lack of awareness of the existence of God due to the family's lack of belief (before entering the correctional facility)-
	Attributes of God	Being wise - being powerful - being great - being light - being a helper - always looking at people - being a support - being everyone - being by the side of people - destruction of people in the absence of God's look
God's image	Unavailability or unresponsiveness of God	Praying not to be transferred to the correctional facility and not being answered - praying a lot and none of them being answered - praying for the cure of father's cancer and not being answered - blaspheming under torture - questioning God's justice - blaming God first and then adapting to the circumstances - Praying to have a bicycle as a child and not being answered

	Wisdom and will of God	God's fault in his parents' fight - God's desire to punish him - God caused him to be trapped so that he knows his friend and enemy - Realizing God's wisdom after thinking about the events - It is God's work to get negative for hashish test and not getting caught – Helping from God in many cases - first blaming God and then realizing His wisdom and improvement of the situation
Worship	Method of worship	Prayer-Quran-Talking to God-Invocation-Flattery toward God-Fasting -Going to the mosque-Eternal Gratitude-Seeking God's compassion
	Request from God	The salvation of Imam Mahdi - recovery of the sick - answering the wishes of others - release from prison - praying for mother - praying for uncle - being guided to the right path - praying for parents
	The outcome of worship	Deliverance from trouble - lack of progress due to family's lack of relationship with God - failure to answer prayers
	The feeling of worship	Good feeling - closeness of God to man - self-confidence - self-belief - insensitivity

We extracted a total of 55 primary codes (not including duplicate ones), eight secondary codes and three themes from the interviews. The main themes were the

perception of God, the image of God, and worship. The primary codes (except duplicate codes), secondary codes and extracted themes are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Adolescent Boys with Conduct Disorder**

Variables	N	
Age	12-14	1
	15-17	8
Level of Education	Elementary School	2
	Secondary School	7
Level of Maternal Education	Elementary School	4
	Secondary School	5
Level of Paternal Education	Elementary School	5
	Secondary School	4
Parents' Marital Status	Divorce	3
	Not Divorce	6
Loss of Father	Yes	4
	No	5
Loss of Mother	Yes	3
	No	6
History of Crime	Yes	3
	No	6
Criminal History of Family Members	Yes	7
	No	2
Addiction in Family Members	Yes	8
	No	1
Substance Use Disorder	Yes	5
	No	4

### **1) Theme I: Perception of God**

We found two sub-themes for perception of God: God's attributes and questions about God's existence.

#### **Attributes of God**

Most participants had a positive view of God. None of the boys mentioned negative attributes for God, which shows their positive interpretation of Him. The positive attributes that the boys mentioned for God are wisdom, power, mercy, greatness, light, support, care, omnipresence, destruction of a person if God does not look at him, God's constant look to man and his constant presence by man's side.

For example, one of the participants said about God's help: *He didn't help us much in the correctional facility, nor here, we worshiped a lot here; for example, we prayed, we invoked, we repented here, we regretted that he didn't help us at all, of course why; for example, to tell the truth, God really helped us, my judicial order was 1,500,000,000 rials, I went here to pray, now I remembered, I said he didn't help me, now I recall that he helped me here, too; 1,500,000,000 rials suddenly decreased to 200,000,000 rials; I was surprised and I went to the judge, he said 200,000,000 rials; madam, I was really freaking out, something beyond happiness.*

*Or another participant said, I just know that God is very great, really generous, He will help if you ask Him; I asked Him, my case was arranged, my case is now, I will be sent gradually after a few months.*

*One of the boys also said, I understood God is so great the first time I went to Welfare Organization, God is so great, God is so great, no one knew him, he can ruin everything here with a single blow, take me out.*

#### **Belief in the Existence of God**

Most of the participants did not believe in God for some time in their life, but they became believers in Him for various reasons. For example, one of the boys thought that he knew God's name since childhood, but he had forgotten it. When he grew older, he was reminded again and realized the greatness of God: *I didn't know what God was at all, God, forgive me, I didn't know he was so great, someone mentioned the name of God, I said, what is God, they laughed at me. I saw the surahs, I didn't know what the surahs were, I knew God's name since I was a child, I had forgotten it, I was not interested in football at all since I was a child, now I am very interested. I am interested in sports, God, the first time I went to Welfare Organization, I realized that He is so great.*

*One of the boys also said, "Maybe I was outside, praying occasionally, I came here, I've been praying since I came, but I was with Him all the time, I always loved Him, I always thanked Him, I was like that when I was younger, I wasn't bad, I knew that I did a lot of enquiry, I asked my mother, my mother told me, then I got older, I asked myself, I was fine.*

*One of the interviewees had recognized God in the correctional facility. He said, "By the way, I'm happy with Him now, because a few days ago I told Him to*

*show me a sign so that I can understand that he really exists, and he gave me a sign that I'm going to be released today." When I was a child, I didn't think that God existed at all because no one prayed at our home, no one recited the Quran, how could I know that God exists. At first, I thought that God doesn't really exist, He doesn't do whatever I pray for or tell about my problems, but since I came to the correctional facility, I realized that God really does exist. He taught me so many good things. I came and told Mrs. Ershlo that I feel better about life. She said, "Don't gain illegitimate property, you have to pay for it. He said good things, every day he told something, I don't remember.*

One of the boys said that he believes in God, but that he has no expectations from Him, and as a result, he does not get angry with God, and he did not believe in God even when he was arrested and brought to the correctional facility. Regarding God, he said, *"Yes, I acknowledge him... I have no expectations from God, I don't get angry with Him, either... I don't think about God, I didn't know who God was when I was arrested, I did whatever I wanted to do. I did not believe in God".*

### **2) Theme II: God's Image**

We found two sub-themes for the theme of God's image: unreachability or unresponsiveness of God and God's wisdom and will.

#### **God's Unreachability or Unresponsiveness**

Some participants stated that occasionally they had a request from God but that their wish was not answered. Some demands were small and some big. One of the boys said, *"When I was a child, I prayed to God to give me a bicycle, but he didn't. Some time ago, I wanted a motorcycle when this happened to me (arrest and transfer to the correctional facility).*

Also, another boy said, *"For example, I have never been angry with Him, for example, how can I tell you, for instance, we got angry two or three times, for example, one happened to our father, he died, he got cancer, for instance, he went to many places for healing such as Imam Reza's Shrine, it didn't work, for example, sometimes we disbelieved, for instance, I said that there is no God and that all these things are futile, it was only one time that we got angry with God.*

Another boy also said, *"I had a good relationship with God when I was a little boy, whenever my heart broke, I was saddened of Him; for example, when my father died, I was seven years old, my brother was three or four years old, my sister was one month old, and my sister had not yet turned forty days, it had been one month, my father died, I said why did this happen, in all this misery, this calamity was added to it.*

#### **God's Wisdom and Will**

Some of the boys believed that what happened to them was God's will; for example, one of the boys who used cannabis some time ago and had a knife with him was arrested by the Police, but there were incidents after which he was released a few hours later without any punishment. He attributed this freedom to God's will

and a help from Him: *"There, I knew, for example, that it was God's work because had it not been for His act, I would have stuck in it, he showed me the same at the case of cannabis, then I had no money. I was going, I was thinking, suddenly the officer called me, gave me money, said you don't have money, go to your home, God has helped me in many places..."*

Another boy considered his freedom a sign from God. He said about God: *"By the way, I am happy with Him now because a few days ago I told Him to show me a sign so that I can understand that he really exists, and he presented me a signal that I am going to be released today."*

One of the boys also considered his arrest to be a fate that God had written for him: *"Or, for example, I said that the complainant started the fight, I came here, why should this happen to me? It's fate, God intended this for me. He forgives people... He created us"*.

Some of the boys also said that sometimes they may have been upset with God for not answering their requests and even expressed blasphemy, but later they realized God's will and wisdom and understood that not answering their requests at that point in time was for their benefit. For example, one of the boys said, *"I was upset with God, I cursed Him, but later I regretted it, for example, when I was arrested, I cursed Him badly, then I started to repent, I knew if God wanted, if he didn't want, what would happen, what would not happen, I have to stay here, I made a mistake, I thought God wants to punish me. I am not upset with God because I am here, they are teaching me good things here, it is better than Welfare Organization. He has helped me so far, and from now on, He will do whatever he can for me. He can do everything."*

Or another boy said, *I think I would reach a position and I would say, God, I have no one but you, I accept my God very much. But then, when I sit down, I think, I see that God did this, something became better for me, God did something. I came here, I knew my friend and my enemy, maybe if I was outside, I would die myself, my father died. For example, before our father died, our living conditions were not like this, but then charity... and it got better, I think I blamed at first, but then when I sit down and think, I see that it has gotten better, not worse."*

### 3) Theme III: Worship

For the theme of worship, we found four sub-themes: Worship methods, asking God, the outcome of worship, and feelings after worship.

#### Worship Methods

Each of the boys worshiped in some way, including praying, reciting the Quran, talking to God, flattering God, fasting, thanking God, complaining to God, and invoking. Some boys mentioned only one of these methods and some several of them together.

One of the boys said, *I have a relationship with God in prayer, I talk to Him in my heart, and I don't know how to recite the Quran*

Another boy compared talking to God with speaking to a human being, with the difference that one may not want to say some things to humans, but he tells God everything. He said, *I pray, I invoke, I feel like I'm in front of him, I have a dialog with Him, just like I talk to a person, but I can't speak with that person like that, things that are very easy in my heart.*

#### Asking God

The boys had different requests from God; for example, the salvation of Imam Mahdi (AS), freedom from prison, healing of the sick, etc.

Many of the requests that the boys had from God were not related to themselves; for example, one of the boys said, *"I do not pray for myself, I pray for my mother, I invoke for the prisoners, I invoke for the prisoners first, then I pray for myself, and the general public. I pray. For example, I say, God, guide me to the right path, for example, so-and-so, for example, how should I say it."*

Another boy also said, *"As soon as I raise my hand at the time of prayer, I invoke and say, O God, whoever is in prison, whoever is in the hospital, for the sake of Abolfazl, for the sake of Fatima, save them, it is another relationship in itself."*

Another boy, in addition to praying for others, said about his wish for freedom: *"I pray first for the salvation of Imam Mahdi, then for all the sick, and then I say, O God, whoever has any wish, fulfill his/her wish, and set me free."*

One of the boys only wished for his freedom. He said, *"Why do I want my freedom? I don't know. I have a lot of work to do. After a while, I will be sent. It is not clear what will happen."*

#### The Outcome of Worship

Some of the boys said that things happened in their lives because of their prayers. For example, one of the boys believed that the bad things that happened to the people surrounding him did not happen to himself because of praying. He said, *"After prayer and supplication, I feel strong, I believe in myself, many disasters have happened to me here, for example, two or three people around me have been afflicted, but for example, I was in prayer, I was in the middle of everything, because of that, I was spared"*.

One of the boys also believed that he had not advanced because his family had not prayed or supplicated. He said, *"The family does not pray or invoke, that's why I did not progress"*.

Another boy was upset that God did not give him a bicycle and a motorcycle. He said, *When I was a child, I prayed to God to give me a bicycle, but he didn't. Some time ago, I wanted a motorcycle when this happened to me, I'm getting angry again (arrest and transfer to the correctional facility).*

#### Feeling Resulting from Worship

Most of the boys said they felt better after praying. One of the boys said, *"After prayer and supplication, I feel good. Also, another person felt self-confidence and*

strength after praying. He said, "After praying and invoking, I feel strong, I believe in myself".

One of the boys felt that God was with him during prayer and supplication. He said, *I feel like He is close to me, I pray, I invoke, I sense him near myself, I talk to Him, just like I talk to a person.*

There was also a boy who prayed but did not have any special feeling after praying. He described his sensation after prayer as follows: *I have no emotion after prayer, supplication and reciting the Quran.*

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship with God among adolescents with conduct disorder. A relationship with God and having religious beliefs can play an important role in controlling aberrant behaviors (12). According to the results of this study, the boys' feelings towards God were generally positive and they had secure attachment to God. Only two of the boys had an insecure attachment to God. This result was contrary to other studies; for example, in a cross-sectional study conducted by Salmanian *et al.* on 60 adolescents with conduct disorder, it was concluded that more than half of adolescents had an insecure attachment to God (26). We found two reasons why we reached such a result. Firstly, it probably has to do with previous teachings the boys had received. Iran's society is religious, which means religious education is given to students in schools, many spiritual programs and films are broadcast on television every day, and religious billboards are installed in many parts of the cities, etc. In such conditions, boys may respond based on what they have learned and not what they feel. For example, they might believe in God rationally or because of propaganda, but they do not feel God's presence in their lives, and for this reason, their faith in God has no effect on their behavior (45). However, some of the boys declared that they did not have a good relationship with God before entering the correctional facility, and even some of them did not know that God existed before entering there the facility.

The second reason, which is stronger than the first, is related to the education that the boys received in the correctional facility. According to some of the boys, they did not have a strong relationship with God before entering the correctional facility, and some of them did not even know that God existed. The boys' relationship with God likely improved to some extent after participating in religious classes and counseling held in the correctional facility. We recommend that attachment to God should be evaluated before and after entering the correctional facility in future studies so that more accurate results can be reached. We also suggest that researchers investigate the extent to which religious classes and counseling can prevent delinquent behavior among people with conduct disorder in the future.

In this study, all the boys declared that they believed in the existence of God. This finding was in line with the

study by Hodayee *et al.* conducted on 66 prisoners aged 15-20 years (46). Also, in our study, none of the boys assigned negative attributes to God.

Usually, adolescents with conduct disorder have insecure attachments in their relationships with other people, including their parents (41, 47). The image people have of God is derived from the model they have of their parents (48, 49). Since the parents of these adolescents are usually not available or responsive and do not respond to their children's needs on time and quickly, the image that adolescents have of God is also the same as their parents, so they do not see God as responsive (26, 41). The boys' reaction to the unanswered prayers was also probably related to the role model provided by their parents. In fact, childhood punishments, lack of love, lack of attention to children's emotions and feelings, and deep emotional gaps cause children to feel abandoned and make them find an image of God as an undesirable being, question His justice, and consider Him to be unresponsive (46).

The results of this study also revealed that boys could be divided into two groups based on their attitude towards the events that happened to them in life. Some of them blamed God for the negative events of life and sometimes even used obscenities and blasphemed God, but the rest of the boys considered the positive and negative events of life to be somehow related to God's will and wisdom and believed that God wanted their good. Boys' perception of God and their trust in God's wisdom can be related to the attachment to their parents. Based on John Bowlby's attachment theory and the studies conducted in the field of attachment to God, it can be concluded that disturbed families, as well as abusive, aggressive and misbehaving parents can cause insecure attachment in children. In this way, this insecure attachment and lack of trust in others can create an unconfident and disturbed spiritual attachment in the child. Also, the image made of God by children could be affected by this mistrust (16, 19, 26, 50). People with anxious attachment may consider God to be punishing and rejecting, and they may doubt God's love for people and His acceptance of themselves. This is while people with avoidant attachment tend to show emotional distance in the relationship with God, do not get close to Him, do not engage in prayers and rituals, or do religious duties out of compulsion rather than out of love (26, 51). Individuals with insecure attachment are likely to imagine God as a judgmental, punishing, and angry object who is looking for an excuse to punish His servants (26).

In this study, the reason for the trust of some boys in God despite their insecure attachment to their parents is probably the participation in religious classes and counseling held in the center. It has already been shown that interventions based on faith and spirituality can improve the image of God in the minds of adolescents with conduct disorder to some extent (36, 37).



### **Clinical Implication**

The results of this study can contribute to our understanding of attachment to God in adolescents with conduct disorder. Attachment to God in adolescents with conduct disorder can be modeled based on the type of attachment to parents, that is, if adolescents' attachment to parents is insecure, they may not have a positive view of God. Trying to change adolescents' attachment to God can also have a compensatory effect on their attachment to parents, in addition to controlling the delinquent behaviors. By increasing our understanding of the concept of attachment to God in adolescents with conduct disorder, the findings of this study can play an important role in designing and developing faith-based and spiritual psychotherapy protocols. Based on the three extracted themes —perception of God, God's image, and worship —psychotherapeutic interventions can be tailored to address each dimension. For instance, cognitive restructuring techniques may be used to challenge and modify negative images of God, while mindfulness practices involving prayer and remembrance can help strengthen the sense of divine presence.

### **Limitation**

This study had several limitations. First, adolescents with conduct disorder may have self-censorship, which can undermine the validity of their interview statements. Second, due to the nature of the correctional facility, boys may present themselves more favorably, and, if they present themselves negatively, they may fear punishment. Third, the participants in this study were from a single correctional facility from Iran; therefore, due to the small sample size, the results of this research are not representative of all Iranian adolescents with conduct disorder. Fourth, due to cultural and environmental factors, adolescents with conduct disorder living in Tehran may have different experiences about their relationship with God compared to those living in different parts of Iran; thus, to generalize the findings of this research, there is a need to conduct more studies in different cities of Iran using various research methods. Fifth, in general, owing to the nature of qualitative studies, there may be reflexivity, response, participant, and non-response biases. However, these biases exist in qualitative studies, but they should be controlled and reduced as much as possible with appropriate measures. Sixth, a main limitation of this study was the lack of a pre-reformatory attachment assessment. Since the participants' attachment to God may have already been influenced by religious classes and structured interventions within the correctional facility, it is unclear how much of their current perceptions were shaped before entering the center. Future studies are recommended to conduct baseline assessments of attachment to God immediately after boys' admission to the facility.

### **Conclusion**

In general, considering that secure attachment to God has a compensatory role, it can compensate for boys' insecure attachment to their parents. The results of this study identified three main themes: "Perception of God" "God's image" and "Worship." These themes can serve as the foundation for designing faith-based psychotherapeutic interventions for adolescents with conduct disorder.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

None.

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