

“Immanuel Journaling” and Thai Seminarians’ Relationship with God (Attachment, Awareness, and Quality)

Rev. Esther Wakeman, Ph.D.¹

ศจ.ดร.เอสเธอร์ เวคแมน

Abstract

A quasi-experimental repeated measures within subjects design was used to investigate the effectiveness of a contemplative prayer protocol called “Immanuel Journaling” (Wilder, et al, 2015) in improving Thai undergraduate theology students’ relationships with God as measured by the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) and the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI). After a four-week control period (students were instructed to continue their usual spiritual practices), there was a significant increase ($p < .043$) in Quality of Relationship to God as measured by the combined scores on four scales of the SAI (Realistic Acceptance, Disappointment, Grandiosity, and Instability) contrary to the hypothesis that no change would occur during the control period. After four weeks of at least 10 times practice of “Immanuel Journaling” there was a significant increase in Awareness of God ($p < .004$); Anxiety about Abandonment did decrease at a level approaching significance ($p < .058$). Results support the contention of Immanuel Journaling’s developers that this prayer approach increases awareness of God. Further study should explore the increase in quality of relationship with God during the control period of the study and to examine the relationship of this type of prayer to decreased Anxiety about Abandonment in relation to God.

¹ อาจารย์ประจำ วิทยาลัยพระคริสต์ธรรมแมคกิลวารี มหาวิทยาลัยพายัพ

During the past several decades, research on various aspects of spirituality has increased greatly (Ladd and Spilka, 2013). During this time, in the Christian community, attention to spiritual formation has been increasing (Willard, 1998). Prayer is an essential element of spirituality and spiritual formation. In their review of the empirical literature on prayer, Ladd and Spilka (2013) note that the number of empirical studies on prayer has grown significantly since the turn of this century. Before 1960 there were very few studies, but between 2000 and 2009, there were 885 publications, which accounts for 65% of all the documents until that time. They define prayer as “theistically oriented behavior.” They note that this definition “presupposes nothing about the content or function of prayer; it merely observes that the behavior has an intended ‘target’ or recipient. It further provides us with a way to separate prayer and meditation” as not all meditation includes an intended recipient (Ladd and Spilka, 2013, p. 293). They also note that “[i]t is imperative that researchers clearly articulate what aspects of prayer they are exploring and under what conditions their exploration is taking place” (p. 293). Furthermore, they assert that “[t]he theology that supports prayer commends the practice as a way for individuals to develop a relationship with God (cf. Baesler, 2003)” (Ladd and Spilka, 2013, p. 298). Kucinkas, Wright, Ray, and Ortberg (2017) explored the variations of spiritual awareness within people’s lives using a smartphone-based experience sampling method and found that spiritual practices such as praying and meditating are strongly related to spiritual awareness. They recommend further research on how specific activities, and the frequency with which they are engaged, might be related to spiritual and religious experiences.

The introduction of technologies that make it possible to examine the brain while it is working have led to exponential expansion of brain research in the past few decades, vastly increasing our understanding of the brain and its functioning. James Wilder and his colleagues are developing a variety of resources which integrate the findings of brain research with spiritual formation toward the goal of increasing the spiritual and emotional maturity of Christians (Friesen, J.G., Wilder, E.J., Bierling, A.M., Koepcke, R., Poole, M., 1999; Wilder, E.J., 2004). They have articulated 19 brain-based relational skills that are necessary for maturity, and have developed a relational skills

training course (Thrive Training) to teach these skills (Wilder, E. J., Khouri, E. M., Coursey, C. M., & Sutton, S. D., 2013).

The training includes assisting participants to develop their skills and capacity in “listening prayer,” a type of contemplative prayer during which the one praying becomes aware of thoughts and ideas from God. Wilder and colleagues hypothesize that this experience is mediated in the cingulate, the part of the brain that mediates “shared mind,” the experience people have in close relationships when thoughts and feelings are shared so deeply that it becomes impossible to know which thoughts began with whom. Thus, it is thought that in this type of contemplative prayer, humans may have the experience of “shared mind” with God so that we “hear” God’s thoughts being shared with us as indistinguishable from our own thoughts. Thus, this type of contemplative prayer involves attending to the thoughts and feelings that arise in our consciousness and assuming that if they are congruent with the character of God and scripture, then we may consider it likely that they are God’s thoughts being shared with our mind (Wilder, E.J., Kang, A., Loppnow, J., and Loppnow, S., 2015).

“Immanuel Journaling” is a prayer method developed by Wilder, Kang, Loppnow, and Loppnow (2015) to facilitate the experience of contemplative prayer or “shared mind” with God and to help people see their lives more in accord with how God sees them (Appendix A). In their book, *Joyful Journey: Listening to Immanuel*, which explains this prayer approach, they note that “Immanuel Journaling is a simple method for improving our awareness of God’s presence in both our thoughts and lives” (Wilder, et al, 2015, page 1). It is based on four different functions of the brain which include: relational attachment, personal reaction, relational synchronization, and identity (individual and group) (p. 35), and on the Bible’s description of God’s delight in people as well as God’s kindness and God’s readiness to provide help to those who seek it. It provides prompts that guide users to become open to and aware of God’s perspective on their physical sensations and state, their thoughts, and their emotions. Further prompts assist users to become aware of God’s delight in them, and kindness toward them, as well as God’s readiness to provide help of some kind in the life situation the person praying is reflecting upon. Extensive use of this prayer approach in the skills training workshops of Wilder and his colleagues, and in the

personal experience of the researcher with it individually, as well as using it in retreats both in Thailand and the United States, suggest that this direct experience of and focus on the loving, supportive, and affirming aspects of God in relationship should improve the quality of relationship with God. But no empirical research has been done to test the efficacy of Immanuel Journaling practice for enhancing the quality of relationship with God.

Bowlby and Ainsworth have developed an area of research on relationships focused on “attachment” (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth, 1985). Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2013) provide a helpful explanation of “attachment” as follows:

Although the term attachment has broad connotations in everyday language, attachment relationships differ from other relationships (including close relationships in general) in important ways. Bowlby (1969/1982) and his close collaborator Mary Ainsworth (1985) used the term attachment relationship to denote a strong affectional bond between two individuals, in which no one is interchangeable with others. The attachment figure accomplishes two important functions for the attached person: (a) provides a safe haven in times of threat or stress and (b) serves as a secure base from which to explore the environment and develop new mental and physical skills. The attached person also resists separation from the attachment figure and experiences anxiety when involuntarily separated. Moreover, loss of the attachment figure leads to grief and mourning. Finally, the attachment figure is, at least implicitly, viewed as stronger and wiser by the attached person. (p. 140)

In their chapter on “Religion, Spirituality, and Attachment” in the APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality: Vol. 1. Context, Theory, and Research, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2013) conclude that “believers’ perceived relationships with God can be characterized as symbolic attachment relationships” (p. 139).

An empirical measure of Attachment to God has been developed and used to assess this aspect of relationship to God (Beck and MacDonald, 2004) called the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI). Subjects are scored on two dimensions —the Anxiety score (which includes potential abandonment and lack of intrinsic lovability)

and Avoidance (avoidance of intimacy and compulsive self-reliance). Lower scores indicate more secure attachment to God (Beck and MacDonald, 2004, p. 100).

An additional useful measure of quality of relationship with God has been developed called the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) (Hall and Edwards, 2002). They note that their model of spiritual development includes both “a more ‘spiritual’ dimension (awareness), as well as a more traditional ‘psychological’ dimension (relational maturity) that [they] believe is a fundamental component of spiritual development” and thus are examining psycho-spiritual development (p. 353). It is a measure of psycho-spiritual development which is psychometrically sound, objective, multidimensional, and congruent with attachment theory, and which is useful for research and clinical applications by psychotherapists, counselors, chaplains, and pastors (pp. 341-342). It has been used in numerous studies (e.g., Chan and Edwards, 1997; Horton, 1998; Seatter, 2001; Tisdale, 1997; Warren, 1998).

The SAI provides scores on six dimensions including: Awareness, Instability, Grandiosity, Realistic Acceptance, Disappointment, and Impression Management. The first dimension, Awareness, is a measure of the spiritual dimension of relationship with God. Instability, Grandiosity, Realistic Acceptance, and Disappointment are measures of maturity in relation to God, and the final dimension is a measure of the degree to which those taking the questionnaire are trying to present themselves in a positive light. It can be used to facilitate interpretation of the results.

The research sample was undergraduate theology students in two Protestant universities in Thailand. Ideally, an experimental design would involve a control group and an experimental group, but using the students of one university as the controls and the students of the other university as the experimental group would introduce error variance due to possible different characteristics of the two groups. Creating control and experimental groups within each school was considered, but due to the group orientation of Thai culture, and the fact that the students at each school live together in dormitories, the researcher was concerned that students would be sharing their experiences between the control and experimental groups and contaminating the data. Thus, a quasi-experimental approach was selected, using first a control period

for all the students, in which they were asked to simply continue their usual spiritual practices, followed by an experimental period.

As noted above, extensive use of the “Immanuel Journaling” prayer approach in the skills training workshops of Wilder and his colleagues, and in the personal experience of the researcher, suggest that it should improve the quality of relationship with God, but this is anticipated only after some regular experience with it. Initially, the researcher hoped to use a 40-day period for subjects to use the prayer approach, as there are several references in the bible to this period of time being associated with significant spiritual experiences, e.g. 40 days and nights of the flood, which led to a new covenant between God and humanity (Genesis 6:9-9:17), 40 days of fasting by Elijah when he fled from King Ahab, and had an epiphany of God’s presence as a still small voice (1 Kings 19), 40 days of Jesus’ testing in the wilderness at the start of his ministry (Matthew 4:1-11), and 40 days from Jesus’ resurrection until his ascension, during which time he trained his disciples in the new way they would need to relate to him (Willard, 1997). But due to time constraints in the academic calendar of the students involved in the study, the maximum time available was four weeks for each period (control and experimental). In the experience of the researcher, the prayer approach can be used daily, but in order to provide what was hoped to be adequate experience without overtaxing the subjects, the frequency of use was set at a minimum of three times per week, for four weeks, during which subjects were asked to practice Immanuel Journaling at least 3 times per week.

It was hypothesized that

- 1) no significant improvement would be found in scores on the AGI and SAI measures after the first 4 weeks of the control period when students used their usual spiritual practices (no significant decreases between pre-test & mid-test scores on the AGI, and no significant increases on the SAI), and that
- 2) significant improvement would be found after four weeks of using Immanuel Journaling at least 3 times per week (significant changes between mid-test and post-test scores (at a $p < .05$ level of significance)) on measures of:
 - a) Students’ attachment to God (as measured by the AGI) (i.e. lower scores on Avoidance and Anxiety)

- b) Students' awareness of God (as measured by the SAI) (i.e. higher scores on Awareness of God), and
- c) Quality of relationship with God of the students (as measured by the SAI) (i.e. higher scores on a combined score of the four scales of Quality of Relationship with God (Realistic Acceptance (RA), Disappointment (D), Grandiosity (G), and Instability (I) after reverse scoring D, G, and I).

METHOD

Participants

The research proposal was approved as ethical by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Christian University, and the deans of both divinity schools from which subjects were recruited gave permission to recruit their undergraduate students for the study. This was the population of the study.

At each institution the students met with the researcher who explained the study and its purpose to investigate their relationships with God and a specific kind of prayer practice. It was explained that if they participated, they would be committing to using this prayer practice for four weeks, at least 3 times each week. They were informed that there was no remuneration for participation (except for a snack after each session), that it was completely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were also given the researcher's contact information and told they should feel free to express any concerns or questions they had. Eighty students signed the consent form for participation. This was the initial sample for the study.

Measures

The Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) developed and validated by Beck and MacDonald (2004) is a 28-item inventory which produces scores on two dimensions, Anxiety and Avoidance (14 items for each dimension answered on a 7-point Likert scale). Seven items are reverse scored. Lower scores on each dimension indicate a more secure or positive attachment to God in that dimension. Alpha coefficients reported by Beck and McDonald (2004) were 0.86 for the Avoidance dimension and 0.84 for the Anxiety dimension.

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The Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) developed by Hall and Edwards (2001) provides scores on six dimensions including: Awareness, Instability, Grandiosity, Realistic Acceptance, Disappointment, and Impression Management. Alpha coefficients of internal consistency of the scales reported by Hall and Edwards were: Awareness, 0.95; Instability, 0.84; Grandiosity, 0.73; Realistic Acceptance, 0.83, Disappointment, 0.09 (Hall & Edwards, 2001). The first dimension, Awareness, is a measure of the spiritual dimension of relationship with God. Instability, Grandiosity, Realistic Acceptance, and Disappointment are measures of maturity in relation to God. These four dimensions of quality of relationship with God were combined into a composite score for quality of relationship with God, by reverse scoring Disappointment, Grandiosity, and Instability. The final dimension is a measure of how those taking the questionnaire are trying to present themselves in a positive light. For the current study, this final dimension, Impression Management, was not used.

The copyright holders of both measures gave permission to use their measures. As the subjects were Thai-speakers, the Immanuel Journaling questions (Appendix B), the AGI (Appendix C), and the SAI (Appendix D) were translated by a team of translators who are fluent in both English and Thai according to the protocol suggested by Beauford, Nagashima, and Wu (2009). The goal was for dynamic translation of meaning rather than direct word for word translation. The team included two Thai professional translators, and the researcher. The team worked together until it reached consensus that a good dynamic translation had been found.

A one-page form for students to fill in with the date and their signature each time they practiced Immanuel Journaling was created with the intent to assist the students in keeping track of how often they were using the practice, and to heighten student accountability and honesty in doing the practice at least 3 times a week for the 4-week experimental period.

An additional follow-up questionnaire (Appendix E) to informally gather qualitative information and feedback on the study was created to be given to the students at the end of the study. Students were asked open-ended questions about what, if any, benefits they had received, what concerns they had, whether they

intended to continue the practice themselves, whether they would encourage others to use the practice, and any suggestions they had about the research.

Data Collection

Pre-test Sessions: Students at each institution were given the Thai translations of the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI) and the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI). They were instructed to practice their usual spiritual practices for the following 4 weeks, at which time they would take the AGI and SAI again, and learn “Immanuel Journaling,” a contemplative prayer approach. During the period between pre-test and mid-test the students were contacted by the researcher once to remind them of the upcoming mid-test and training session.

Mid-test and Immanuel Journaling Training Sessions: Approximately 4 weeks after the Pre-test session, the students were given the AGI and SAI for the second time. When all students had completed the measures, the researcher explained the background of Immanuel Journaling and led the students through the protocol step by step, excluding the 7th step, so all participants practiced it once before beginning the experimental period. For this study, students were instructed that it was not required for them to do the seventh step, but they could if desired.

The Immanuel Journaling prayer protocol is a seven-step prayer method intended to help people see their lives the way God does. Participants first connect to God through expressing their gratitude to God in writing, and then listening to God’s response to their gratitude, by noticing and writing the thoughts which come into their minds. The following five steps are five more prompts, which are written as if God is speaking. Participants notice the thoughts that come to mind in response to the prompts and write them down. In the seventh step, they speak out loud what they wrote or share what they wrote with another person. The seven steps as shown in the protocol are:

STEP ONE — Gratitude. Write anything I appreciate and then write God’s response to my gratitude. Dear God, I’m thankful for

Dear child of mine

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STEP TWO — I can see you. Write from God’s perspective what he observes in you right now, including your physical sensations. e.g. I can see you at your desk. Your breathing is shallow and your shoulders are tight

STEP THREE — I can hear you. Write from God’s perspective what he hears you saying to yourself.

e.g. You are wondering if I will speak to you and how you would ever know. You are discouraged and tired OR: You woke up full of energy this morning. You are ready to take on the world. Your mind is buzzing

STEP FOUR — I understand how big this is for you. How does God see your dreams, blessings or upsets and troubles?

e.g. I want you to know that I care about what matters to you. Your desire to honor me brings me great pleasure OR: I understand how intimidated you feel. This situation feels all-consuming to you as if you are about to sink

STEP FIVE — I am glad to be with you and treat your weakness tenderly. How does God express his desire to participate with your life?

e.g. Your dreams are precious to me. I fill you with life each day and really enjoy your desire to OR: I see your discouragement after yelling again. Times when you are frustrated and tired are when I want to be closer to you

STEP SIX — I can do something about what you are going through. What does God give you for this time?

e.g. Come away with me. I offer you times of refreshing, new energy and vision OR: I will strengthen you. Remember how your friend encouraged you last week? With me you are not alone

STEP SEVEN — Read what you have written aloud (preferably to someone.)

Participants’ questions were answered to clarify any concerns about the prayer method. The students also received 15 Immanuel Journaling protocol forms for their use during the following 4 weeks (to do at least 3 times per week). And they received the log-form to fill out the dates when they did Immanuel Journaling, which they were asked to sign after each time.

Immanuel Journaling practice period: The researcher sent a weekly mass email message to the students greeting them and reminding them to continue their Immanuel Journaling process and offering to answer any questions or concerns.

Post-test and debriefing sessions: Approximately 4 weeks after the mid-test and Immanuel Journaling training session, the students were given the AGI and SAI for the third time. The log-forms for recording Immanuel Journaling practice were collected. The students were also given the informal qualitative questionnaire as an opportunity to express their experience of Immanuel Journaling and make suggestions to the researcher. The researcher reviewed the purpose of the research and offered an opportunity for the students to learn the results when the analysis had been completed. The students were thanked verbally, and received a snack, as they had after every session.

RESULTS

Out of a total population of approximately 100 undergraduate theology students who were recruited from the two government-recognized Protestant seminaries in Thailand, 80 signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the study. The form assured the students they were free to drop out of the study at any time. By the final phase of the study a total of 26 students had participated in all phases of the study, completing the AGI and SAI on all three testing occasions—pre-test, mid-test, given after 4 weeks of continuing their usual spiritual practices, and the post-test, given after 4 weeks of using Immanuel Journaling for a total of at least 10 times. The original plan had been that students must complete the protocol at least 3 times per week for 4 weeks, which would total a minimum of 12 times, but the total number of students who did this was too low for statistical analysis. Therefore, any students whose log-form showed they had done Immanuel Journaling at least 10 times over the four-week period were included in the analysis. The completion rate was 33%, which may be typical for a study that takes two months to complete with a fair amount of personal discipline required.

Scores on both scales of the AGI (Anxiety and Avoidance) and the Awareness of God scale of the SAI were recorded for all three administrations (Pre-test, Mid-test, and Post-test). Scores on Realistic Acceptance, Disappointment, Grandiosity, and

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Instability, from the SAI, were combined into one score (after reverse scoring Disappointment, Grandiosity, and Instability) which was named Quality of Relationship with God. Matched pair t-tests were computed for each period of the study for both scales of the AGI (Anxiety and Avoidance), the Awareness of God scale of the SAI, and on the combined scales of the SAI (Quality of Relationship with God), comparing pre-test and mid-test scores on all the variables (predicting no improvement) and comparing mid-test and post-test scores on all the variables (predicting change in a direction of improved relationship with God). Because the t-test is two-tailed, but the hypotheses predict change in one direction, all significance results are divided by 2 to ascertain the one-tailed result. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

Informal qualitative data were gathered in order to provide more information on the subjective experiences of the students in the research study (Appendix F). The data was collected from more students than those included in the quantitative analysis, so it reflects the experience of a broader group, including those who did not complete the protocol.

Hypothesis 1 predicted no significant improvement would be found in scores on the AGI and SAI measures after the first 4 weeks of the control period when students used their usual spiritual practices (no significant decrease between pre-test & mid-test scores on the AGI, and no significant increase on the SAI scores). As can be seen in Table 1, this hypothesis was supported for both sub-variables of Attachment with God (Anxiety and Avoidance), and for Awareness of God, but there was a significant increase in Quality of Relationship with God ($p < .043$), which was not predicted and contradicted the null hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 predicted significant changes in a positive direction would be found after four weeks of using Immanuel Journaling at least 3 times per week (significant changes between mid-test and post-test scores (at a $p < .05$ level of significance)) on all variables. The following results can be seen in Table 2. Hypothesis 2 (a) that students’ attachment to God (as measured by the AGI) (i.e. lower scores on Avoidance and Anxiety) would improve was not supported. However, scores on Anxiety about Abandonment did decrease at a level approaching but not reaching significance ($p < .058$). Hypothesis 2 (b) that students’ awareness of God (as measured by the SAI)

(i.e. higher scores on Awareness of God), would increase was supported ($p < .004$). Hypothesis 2 (c) that students' quality of relationship with God (as measured by the SAI) (i.e. higher scores on a combined score of the four scales of Quality of Relationship with God (Realistic Acceptance (RA), Disappointment (D), Grandiosity (G), and Instability (I) after inverting the scores of D, G, and I) would improve was not supported.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis that there would not be any significant changes on any scores during the control period of the first 4 weeks when students simply continued using their usual spiritual practices, was supported for all variables but one. There was a significant improvement in scores on Quality of Relationship with God for this period. This may be due to something similar to the Hawthorne Effect, where simply knowing they were involved in a study about their relationship with God influenced their attention and interest in positive ways. It is also possible that testing effects contributed to this result, whereby completing the questionnaires in the pre-test phase became an unintended intervention that enhanced quality of relationship with God for the initial period of the study.

Responses to an open-ended informal qualitative questionnaire indicated that participation in the research had many positive aspects for many students. Most of these seem to be connected to the Immanuel Journaling phase of the research, but simply participating in the study may have heightened students’ awareness of their relationship with God, and the request to continue their usual spiritual practices may have encouraged more awareness and use of those practices during the control period which then resulted in significant improvement in quality of relationship with God.

The second hypothesis that there would be significant changes in scores in a positive direction for Attachment with God (decreases in Avoidance and Anxiety), Awareness of God, and Quality of Relationship with God was supported for only one of the variables: there was a significant increase in scores on Awareness of God. The first sentence of the book *Joyful Journey: Listening to Immanuel*, which explains this prayer approach, states, “Immanuel Journaling is a simple method for improving our awareness of God’s presence in both our thoughts and lives” (Wilder, et al, 2015, page 1). This research lends support to this contention of the developers of Immanuel Journaling; it has been shown to increase awareness of God among Thai seminary students. This result suggests that it is worth promoting as a useful tool for spiritual formation in students. Informal qualitative responses strongly supported this outcome, and also provide a fuller picture of the students’ experience. About half of the students noted that learning to listen to God rather than doing all the talking in prayer was a benefit. Almost

half also mentioned feeling closer to God and experiencing God's presence and help as benefits. One fourth expressed experiencing God more fully as having help and answers for their problems and concerns of daily life.

However, there were no other significant changes in positive directions on the other measures used in the study. Scores on Anxiety about Abandonment (an element of Attachment with God) were lower, and approached the level of significance, but did not meet it. Further research could explore whether Anxiety might be reduced further through using Immanuel Journaling for a longer period of time than was available for this study.

Generalizability of this study is limited by its use of undergraduate theology students as subjects. It is also not clear how repeated testing with the AGI and SAI may have influenced the results. Additionally, it would be ideal if separate control and experimental groups could be used. These concerns could be addressed by doing further study with a larger sample of ordinary church members.

Further study of Immanuel Journaling would be worthwhile. From the qualitative feedback on the research provided by the students, it would be important to make sure that participants clearly understand how to use the prayer protocol and are comfortable using it before the experimental period begins. In addition, for research done in Thailand, the Thai translation of the Immanuel Journaling protocol and the questionnaires should also be improved, using Thai examples in the prayer protocol. Future study should include formal qualitative research that would enhance understanding of participants' experience of this kind of prayer.

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