



# Attachment and emotion regulation: Compensatory interactions and leader–member exchange<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The current study draws on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) to examine how attachment (a relationship-based trait disposition), and the interaction between attachment and emotion regulation, relate to LMX quality. Data were collected from subordinates and supervisors in a variety of work settings. Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance negatively predicted LMX quality. Moderator effects were found between attachment and emotion regulation.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a voluminous and compelling literature underscoring the importance of reliable and supportive parental care during early childhood to the development of “relationship scripts”. Relationship scripts underlie the propensity to initiate and build trusting, enduring and enriching relationships (Kahn & Kram, 1994; Keller, 2003). Much of this research has evolved from Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, which has been the basis for several studies of workplace relationships (Harms, 2011). Given the parallels in the power differential in parent–child and leader–follower relationships, attachment theory may offer insights into the processes underlying leader–member exchange (LMX) (Harms, 2011; Martin, Epitropaki, Thomas, & Topaka, 2010). Surprisingly then, there are no studies of LMX that have drawn from attachment theory.

Attachment theory posits that people are born with an innate tendency to seek proximity to others (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982). Individuals who, in early childhood, received consistent parental support develop *secure* attachment styles (and a positive view of self and others); while those who received inconsistent support develop *anxious* attachment styles (and a negative view of self); and persons who consistently received a lack of parental support develop avoidant attachment styles (and a negative view of others). Individuals with higher attachment anxiety tend to be especially anxious to retain the support and acceptance of their relationship partner, expressed as insecurity, lack of trust, and high dependency. People high in avoidant attachment typically suppress desire for affiliation and avoid close relationships altogether. As these styles are fairly stable throughout adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005) they could adversely affect the propensity to initiate, develop and sustain high quality LMX.

This study contributes to the LMX literature in several ways. First, using the dyad as the unit of analysis, we offer the first assessment of the relationship between attachment style and LMX quality. Second, our measure of attachment aligns with the original dimensional conceptualization of attachment style (Richards & Schat, 2011), as opposed to typographical approaches to its measurement (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Third, we test for the moderating influence of emotion regulation (ER). ER refers to the *process* by which individuals attempt to influence their own emotions; *when* they experience them, and *how* they express

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them behaviorally (Gross, 1998a). We present theory supportive of the notion that ER strategies (i.e., reappraisal and/or suppression) interact with attachment style (of leader and subordinate) to influence LMX quality.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. LMX

Grounded in role theory (Merton, 1968), social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967), LMX focuses on the dyadic exchange between a leader and a subordinate, as well as the process through which the relationship develops. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) noted that “LMX clearly incorporates an operationalization of a relation-based approach to leadership” (p. 109), one founded on social exchanges that are mutually beneficial to both parties (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Quality LMX relationships require high levels of mutual trust and are composed of mutual respect, positive affect and loyalty. High quality LMX is also characterized by perceived equity in the contributions of each party (Liden & Maslyn, 1998) and positively predicts a variety of work related outcomes, including satisfaction with supervision, affective organizational commitment, and objective measures of performance ( $r = .71, .31$  and  $.11$ , respectively; Gerstner & Day, 1997).

LMX incorporates a social exchange perspective (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997) wherein tangible and intangible currencies are exchanged (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social exchanges can be differentiated from other forms of exchange in that they are voluntary actions that the agent expects to be reciprocated (Blau, 1964). Within the leader-subordinate dyad a series of reciprocal exchanges come to define increasingly stable role expectations. The quality of the relationship that ultimately develops is thought to be determined by the degree to which each party perceives the exchanges to be fair and equitable (Wayne, Shore, & Linden, 1997), underscoring the importance of *interpersonal* and *contextual* factors (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997).

### 2.2. Attachment theory

A key premise of the current study is that an attachment style involving a negative view of the self or of others (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) adversely affects the relationships an employee has at work. Attachment theory (cf. Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982) posits that individuals have an innate tendency to seek proximity to others in times of need. Specifically, innate attachment behaviors are intended to attract and maintain proximity to attachment figures (i.e., supportive others) to defend against psychological or physical threats (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Bowlby (1973) proposed that patterns of attachment arise from early experiences with supportive others (primarily parents or caregivers) including the extent to which they are available and responsive. From early experiences, people are thought to develop relatively stable and lasting scripts or mental models of attachment that influence their subsequent interpersonal experiences (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Later, Harms (2011) conceptually broadened attachment style to include a composite of motives (e.g. desire for emotionally close relationships); abilities (e.g. ability to develop close relationships) and perceptions (e.g. the degree to which others wish to develop close relationships).

Also moving beyond Bowlby, Harms (2011) proposed that one's generalized attachment orientation reflects a history of prior attachment relationships but it may be modified based on experiences and expectations specific to new relationships. Others have posited that the attachment style enacted in any particular relationship may reflect not only one's generalized attachment style but also one's experiences with the particular other (cf. Keller, 2003), an idea awaiting empirical investigation. As per trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), perhaps one's core attachment style is activated to lesser or greater degrees by the actions of others. For example, attachment systems developed early in life tend to be activated by distress or fear (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Still, psychological processes sustain attachment patterns (e.g. seeking feedback that supports view of self and others; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007); and a change in attachment style becomes difficult with repeated, uncorrected use of habitual models and schemas (Keller & Cacioppe, 2001).

The conceptualization of adult attachment has evolved from a categorical typology to a dimensional conceptualization consisting of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Ross, McKim, & DiTommaso, 2006). Attachment security (low levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance) relates to optimism, positive views of the self and others, and confidence that help will be available in times of distress, thereby enabling optimal functioning (Mikulincer, 1995). Attachment anxiety, on the other hand, is characterized by a negative view of self, an overdependence on relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005), and a tendency to be hyper-vigilant to social and emotional cues from others (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006). Highly anxious people also experience distress associated with separation from attachment figures and fear that they will be rejected or abandoned (Bowlby, 1973).

Attachment avoidance entails viewing others as unavailable or untrustworthy in times of need (Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005) leading to the “deactivation of proximity seeking, inhibition of the quest for support, and active attempts to handle distress alone” (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003, p.85). Deactivation of attachment systems is undertaken to avoid the anticipated additional frustration associated with the unavailability of a trustworthy attachment figure (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). This results in the denial and suppression of attachment needs, the dismissal of threat-related signals, the denial of the importance of relationships, and the avoidance of emotional involvement or intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Avoidant individuals broaden deactivation to include a generalized distancing from distress even in situations that are not attachment-related (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Finally, attachment styles are differentiated both theoretically and empirically from personality (Harms, 2011).

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