



Attachment and responses to employment dissolution



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ABSTRACT

We propose that theory and research on how individuals deal with loss or potential loss of personal relationships can inform our understanding of how employees deal with the loss or potential loss of the employment relationship. In particular, we examine the possibility that attachment theory – which plays a central role in explaining an individual's affective, cognitive and behavioral response to the loss of central close relationships – may explain the psychological mechanisms and behavioral reactions associated with the loss of an employment relationship. A key tenet underlying attachment theory is the idea that people develop internal models of attachment, which determine how individuals handle a variety of life's adversities, including but not confined to relationship loss. This research provides a theoretical perspective suggesting that the psychological and physiological effects of job loss may perhaps be related to the emotional trauma, grief and abandonment associated with the loss of the “employment relationship”, rather than the financial and social strains associated with the job loss. Further, our research also suggests that strong psychological ties with the organization are not always associated with positive outcomes for the organization, specifically, in the event of employment dissolution. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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Secure relationships are a source of deep comfort, healing and well-being for any individual. They are critical determinants of an individual's happiness and play a central role in regulating their emotional well-being and social behavior (Bowlby, 1980; Cozolino, 2006). Relatedly, the loss of an important relationship is one of the most devastating and painful events in life – one that often elicits powerful emotional reactions such as anxiety, despair, sadness and anger (Fraley & Bonanno, 2004; Wortman & Silver, 1989). This loss is often associated with long-term negative psychological and physiological effects such as chronic depression, immune suppression, heart disease, high-blood pressure, and decreased longevity due to suicide or homicide (Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987).

In organizational settings, individuals are often faced with the loss or potential loss of the employment relationship. Examples include organizational restructuring, downsizing, layoffs, performance-based termination, termination for other reasons (e.g. policy violations), and mandatory retirement. While there exists a significant body of research examining the effects of job loss on individuals (e.g., Kinicki & Latack, 1990), particularly on employees' coping responses to job loss (e.g., proactive search for new employment, positive self-assessment, and job devaluation) and potential job loss (e.g., Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2012), this research has not considered the extent to which the loss of an employment relationship is similar to the loss of an intimate personal relationship and how this seemingly disparate body of literature may inform our understanding of the dissolution of employment relationships.

Like any intimate interpersonal relationship, an employment relationship involves deep emotional ties, psychological attachment, personal investments, common identification, and a sense of common obligation (Buchanan, 1975; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982;

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O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Moreover, employees tend to perceive themselves as being in a relationship with their organization, and perceive their organization as a personalized entity with human-like traits (e.g., Lawler, 1992; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). When their organization cares for them and values their contributions, they experience higher levels of trust and commitment towards the organization (e.g., Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). In contrast, if their employing organization violates such expectations, they feel angry, betrayed, and tend to experience withdrawal cognitions, similar to an interpersonal relationship (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003; Maertz & Griffeth, 2004; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Shackelford & Buss, 1996). In other words, a strong employment relationship provides the employee a safe haven for friendships, social support, security, achievement and recognition (Hochschild, 1997).

The loss of an employment relationship is also one of the most traumatic and stressful events in an individual's life (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Mosser, 2009), which elicits behavioral, psychological and physiological responses similar to the dissolution of a central interpersonal relationship in one's life. The negative impacts of this loss are far beyond the loss of income and financial strain (Kessler, Turner, & House, 1988) even when a person receives compensation from the organization (Hansen, 1988). For instance, employment dissolution has been linked to chronic and intense anxiety, anger, and depression (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1933; Winefield & Tiggemann, 1990), reduced self-esteem (Feather, 1982; Leventman, 1981), suicidal intentions, high blood pressure (Brenner, 1977; Cobb & Kasl, 1977) and physical illness (Jackson & Warr, 1984), all of which are strikingly similar to the outcomes experienced during the break-up of an interpersonal relationship.

We propose that theory and research on how individuals deal with the loss or potential loss of personal relationships can inform our understanding of how employees deal with the loss or potential loss of the employment relationship. In particular, we draw from *attachment theory* (e.g. Bowlby, 1969), which plays a central role in explaining an individual's responses to the dissolution of important close relationships (e.g., Fraley & Bonanno, 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a; 2007b). A key tenet underlying attachment theory is the idea that people tend to recreate the dynamics of past relationships with important figures (Bowlby, 1980) and act as if those dynamics are part of existing relationships (e.g., with spouses, co-workers, organizations, and products). Specifically, individuals develop attachment models that guide their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies in their interpersonal relationships. Moreover, these internal models function as inner structures upon which individuals organize, respond to, and handle a variety of life's adversities, including but not exclusively confined to relationship loss.

The implications of examining whether individuals utilize these same internal models to respond to the potential loss of an employment are manifold. First, existing research on job loss focuses heavily on the economic discrepancies and financial strain generated by job loss (Kessler et al., 1988). Even when the psychological and physiological effects of job loss are considered (e.g., Cobb & Kasl, 1977; Fryer & Payne, 1986), research has not considered that these outcomes may perhaps be related to the emotional trauma, and feelings of abandonment and grief associated with the loss of the "relationship", rather than the financial and social strains associated with the job loss.

Second, given the important role that employment dissolution plays in the well-being and, more generally, the lives of most individuals, little is known about the individual-level determinants of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses and outcomes associated with this important life-event. While some research has used qualitative case studies to describe the emotional reactions associated with employment dissolution (Jahoda et al., 1933), very little research has examined and explained this from a theoretical perspective (for a review see Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995).

Third, researchers have called for identifying factors that determine the selection of coping strategies in the event of employment loss (e.g., Kinicki & Latack, 1990). For example, Fugate et al.'s (2012) research on coping with impending organizational restructuring considers cognitive appraisal as the key psychological mechanism explaining individual reactions. Attachment theory broadens this perspective by explaining the foundations of individual cognitive appraisals, and also addressing the origins of emotional and behavioral reactions to employment dissolution.

Finally, increasing our understanding of the role of attachment models may help employees experiencing job loss and their organizational representatives managing these issues, by providing them with information to develop proactive strategies that will abate some of the destructive outcomes associated with involuntary turnover. For example, attachment theory may help us answer questions such as 'who expresses the most distress when the relationship ends?', 'who makes a peaceful exit?', 'who obsesses about hurting the organization after the relationship has ended?', 'who chooses to maintain their relationship with the organization?', and even 'whose behaviors make them a likely candidate for dissolution?'

In what follows, we begin by explaining attachment theory and reviewing relevant literature linking attachment to work-related behaviors. We then discuss the importance of attachment in understanding employment dissolution experiences. Further, we integrate concepts from attachment and relationships to explain cognitions, affective reactions, and behaviors associated with employment dissolution, and develop meaningful propositions useful for future empirical investigations. We integrate these bodies of literature to make important advancements in theory, and conclude with a discussion of important implications relevant to organizational and human resource management.

1. Internal models for love and work

The themes of love and work are central to human existence, and regarded as powerful determinants of psychological well-being in theory (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961) as well as in empirical research for the past few decades (e.g., Baruch et al., 1983; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Lee & Kanungo, 1984). Additionally, research has revealed that an individual's experiences of love and work are not "separate" (e.g., Kanter, 1977; Piotrkowski, 1978) but in reality, inextricably blended with each other, and may have possible links to one's early social interactions and close relationship experiences (Hardy & Barkham, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1990). It is likely that these early interactions have influenced the development of particular stances towards relationships within individuals,

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