



Adult attachment styles in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has demonstrated that attachment styles are important antecedents of interpersonal relationship quality and psychological well-being. Despite this, the theory of attachment styles has been largely ignored by researchers interested in workplace phenomena. The present paper aims to explain the theory of attachment styles, why researchers have overlooked attachment styles as an antecedent of organizational behavior, and a possible means of reconciling attachment theory with current models of personality. Moreover, I will review what existing research has actually demonstrated in terms of linking attachment styles to leadership, trust, satisfaction, performance and other outcomes. Finally, I will explore what possible future directions may be taken by researchers in the future in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of the role of attachment styles in the workplace.

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Although it is generally considered one of the “grand theories” in personality research, attachment theory has received scant attention from researchers investigating the role of individual differences in the workplace. Possible reasons for the failure to address the role of attachment styles in the workplace range from overcoming conceptual boundaries and potential assessment issues to the predominance of trait models and the general disdain for psychodynamic models in the applied literature. Nonetheless, over the last two decades, a small number of studies have attempted to examine the role of attachment styles and a variety of behaviors, attitudes, and experiences in the workplace setting. These studies have focused primarily on issues of leader–follower dynamics and perceptions, job attitudes and stress, and performance outcomes. While these studies represent some progress in the field for integrating attachment theory into standard organizational behavior models, there remains a great deal of research to be done in order to integrate attachment theory into current models of leadership, performance, and job satisfaction.

1. Attachment theory

Attachment theory, based on the work of [John Bowlby \(1982\)](#), postulates that all individuals are born with an innate desire to seek proximity to others in times of need or distress in order to enhance their survival prospects. To the extent to which these efforts to gain proximity are successful, individuals develop a sense of security. This sense of security (or lack thereof) then becomes the basis of their own individual attachment style which then remains relatively fixed over the lifespan of the individual.

Bowlby’s theory of attachment was originally inspired by his observation that socially maladjusted and delinquent boys were disproportionately likely to have experienced some sort of severe disruption in their early home life ([Bowlby, 1944](#)). To explain these findings, Bowlby integrated research from psychodynamic theory, comparative psychology, cognitive developmental psychology, and the principles of control systems ([Fraleigh & Shaver, 2008](#)). In particular, Bowlby focused his attention on the *attachment behaviors* (e.g. crying, grabbing and clinging, and frantic searching) he observed in young infants who were separated from their caregivers. Bowlby postulated that because mammalian infants are largely unable to feed or protect themselves, that their survival is dependent on their ability to maintain proximity with older, wiser, and more capable adults. Consequently, their actions, which may seem extreme, function as an adaptive response to separation from a primary attachment figure. That is, they

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engage in these behaviors in order to attract the attention and care of someone with a history of providing support, protection, and affection to the child. Bowlby argued that over time, evolutionary processes would select for individuals who were more successful at attracting and maintaining proximity to attachment figures. Over time, humans (and other species) developed an “attachment behavioral system” that is triggered whenever an infant is separated from its primary caregiver. According to this system, if an infant is in proximity to their caregiver, they will experience security, love, and confidence and will tend to be more sociable and engage in exploratory behavior. However, if the infant is separated from their primary attachment figure, they will display attachment behaviors ranging from visually monitoring their attachment figure to vocal signaling, clinging, and actively searching for their attachment figure. These behaviors persist until either the desired level of proximity and attention is reached or the child becomes exhausted. Failures to reestablish proximity were believed to shape a child’s expectations of their relationship with their caregiver as well as influencing their own conceptions of self-worth.

While Bowlby’s model describes the basic processes by which the attachment system operates, it was not until later that researchers established the basic attachment patterns that emerged in response to histories of successful and unsuccessful attachment-seeking efforts. The primary attachment styles used in research today were based on research by Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Behar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) using young infants assessed using a technique called the “Strange Situation.” This procedure involved separating infants from their parent for a short period of time and observing their reactions. The majority of children behaved in a manner that corresponded to Bowlby’s attachment theory. When their parent left, they engaged in attachment behaviors and/or became upset, but when their parent returned they were easily soothed. These infants were referred to as “secure” in their attachment orientation. Other infants (approximately 20%) also displayed attachment-seeking behaviors upon separation, but when their parents returned were not easily soothed and continued in displays of distress. Researchers interpreted this response as still reflecting a desire for proximity to the attachment figure, but also a desire to punish their parent for leaving them in the first place. Infants with this style of response were labeled as “anxious” in their attachment orientation. The final group of infants (approximately 20%) failed to show much distress when separated from their parents. Moreover, when their parent returned, they appeared to be actively avoiding contact with their parent. Infants displaying this pattern of behavior were labeled as “avoidant” in their attachment orientation. Both of the latter styles were considered “insecure” attachment styles. Ainsworth’s research not only provided the first basic taxonomy of attachment styles, but also demonstrated that the individual differences in attachment responses witnessed in the strange situation were related to prior histories in the parent–child relationship. That is, secure infants typically had parents who were responsive to their needs while insecure infants often had parents who were either insensitive to their needs or inconsistent in their responses to the attachment-seeking behaviors of their children. Interestingly, additional research established that although there is correspondence between the attachment styles displayed towards fathers and mothers, there is also a large degree of relationship-specificity (Fox, Kimmerly, & Schafer, 1991). Consequently, it is believed that attachment styles reflect more than temperamental differences in infants (Fraleay & Shaver, 2008).

Bowlby hypothesized that the experiences that infants had with their parents would result in scripts or working models of attachment that would continue to influence interpersonal experiences throughout the lifespan of the individual. Recent research on adult attachment styles has largely supported this belief (Fraleay & Brumbaugh, 2004; Fraleay & Shaver, 2008). Research on adult attachment has largely focused on romantic relationships as an alternative context for the attachment behavioral system to operate in. In these relationships, we see functional similarities between the infant–parent and romantic partner relationships (Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988). For example, in both cases individuals feel more at ease when their attachment figure is present and insecure when separated. When the attachment figure is present, individuals tend to engage in close physical contact and pay special attention to their attachment figure. While the majority of prior research has been conducted on romantic relationships, it is believed that the same patterns of attachment would be found in other relationships that may activate attachment scripts such as leader–follower relationships (Kahn & Kram, 1994; Keller, 2003; Troth & Miller, 2000).

1.1. Assessment of adult attachment

Tests for adult attachment are of three primary types: interview, self-report typologies, and self-report dimensional questionnaires. The Adult Attachment Interview (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) focuses primarily on an individual’s attachment orientation with regard to their family of origin. Individuals are quizzed regarding the amount of contact they had with other relatives, experiences of loss (i.e. death) or separation, quality of relationship with attachment figures, feelings of rejection, beliefs concerning the motivations of attachment figures, and the presence of alternative attachment figures. Early self-report tests of adult attachment were based on Ainsworth’s taxonomy and involved giving individuals descriptions of the three primary attachment patterns and have them rate themselves according to which description best characterized them (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Research using this tool found strikingly similar results to the strange situation technique used on infants with regard to the distributions of attachment styles in the population. Approximately 60% of individuals described themselves as generally have securely attached relationship with 20% of those surveyed describing themselves as being more similar to each of the insecure types of attachment. Later measures of attachment (e.g. Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraleay, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) have tended to be dimensionally-based with individuals responding to a large number of attachment-related statements (e.g. I worry a lot about my relationships). The dimensional models of attachment generally have two primary dimensions: attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. Individuals high on attachment-related anxiety report greater anxiety with regard to whether their partners are available and responsive to them. Individuals high on attachment-related avoidance report disliking it when others open up to them emotionally and being less prone to relying on the support of others. Secure individuals would be those who are low on both of these individuals and report not only being more secure in terms of their expectations of others, but

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