The impact of adult attachment style on organizational commitment and adult attachment in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

Adult attachment style has only recently been considered as having a role in explaining work behavior. The present research aimed to explore the impact of adult attachment style, assessed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), on organizational commitment (OC) and on adult attachment in the workplace (AAW). We hypothesized that a secure attachment style would be positively related to affective and normative commitment, while preoccupied and avoidant styles would be negatively related to affective commitment; we also hypothesized that there would be a correspondence between the AAI categories and the AAW dimensions. Using the AAI categories as group variable, analysis of average OC and AAW scores confirmed the hypotheses. Secure workers had a higher mean score for affective commitment than avoidant and preoccupied workers; normative commitment was higher in avoidant than in secure and preoccupied workers; continuance commitment was higher in preoccupied than in secure and avoidant workers. Moreover, AAI categories converged with AAW dimensions: secure workers had higher secure AAW scores than avoidant and preoccupied workers; avoidant workers had higher avoidant AAW scores than secure and preoccupied workers; preoccupied workers had higher preoccupied AAW scores than secure and avoidant workers.

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1. Introduction

Research on the personality determinants of organizational behavior and attitudes as organizational commitment, has a long history (e.g., Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002), and personality traits and individual differences are considered to be influencing factors with respect to the variables most closely related to the organization. However, the impact of individual factors on organizational behavior is still a source of debate among researchers. For instance, in their influential article, Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1989) deemed personality effects on organizational behavior to be more illusory than real, concluding that "dispositions are likely to have only limited effects on attitudes and behavior inside organizations" (p. 396). On the other hand, a close relationship has been found between personality traits and different work behaviors (e.g., De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001).

In the last 15 years, adult attachment style has been considered to play a primary role in work behavior, and attachment theory has been shown to account for variance in organizational variables above that of other personality traits (Neustadt, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2011; Richards & Schat, 2011). In fact, empirical data suggest that attachment style (secure, preoccupied, or avoidant), being relatively stable from childhood to adulthood (Berlin & Cassidy, 2002; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994), is involved in interpersonal experiences (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 1997, 2000) as well as in the quality of work relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Moreover, attachment theory suggests that individuals with different attachment styles differ in terms of boundary maintenance between self and other (Cassidy & Belsky, 1994; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994), as confirmed by differences in attachment patterns in different life contexts. Consequently, adults with different internal working models differ in their retrospective perceptions of interpersonal and emotional experiences and in their views of self and other (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 1997). So, adult attachment style may be readily extendable to the workplace domain as well, and serve as a possible determinant of employee interrelating attitudes and behaviors.

This paper aims to investigate the impact of adult attachment style on organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990) and attachment in the workplace (Neustadt, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2006; Neustadt, Furnham, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2006; Scrima, 2015), using the Adult Attachment Interview (Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2002) to assess attachment styles.

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2. Evaluating the impact of adult attachment style on organizational commitment and adult attachment in the workplace with the Adult Attachment Interview

Recently, renewed attention has been given to attachment theory to explore the impact of attachment style on organizational life, and several researchers (e.g., Richards & Schat, 2011; Scrima, 2014) have shown a relationship between attachment style and relevant organizational attitudes, such as organizational commitment and the quality of the relationships between colleagues.

However, researchers in organizational settings have mostly used self-report measures of adult attachment. The main criticism of these measures is that they examine conscious attitudes to close relationships and thus do not take into account any response bias; also, self-report questionnaires have been criticized for not detecting attachment patterns that can only be expressed once they have been activated (Ravitz, Maunder, Hunter, Sthankiya, & Lancee, 2010). Interview methods can reduce response distortions and increase attachment activation while focusing on close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bifulco, Mahon, Kwon, Moran, & Jacobs, 2003).

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI: Main et al., 2002) is probably the most influential instrument for evaluating attachment at the level of representation (Hesse, 2008). It enables inferences to be made about attachment in adults, based on the quality of descriptions of relationships with important adults in childhood. The AAI views attachment from a developmental perspective, seeing attachment as a life-span concept that is relatively stable over time (Berman & Sperling, 1994).

Empirical data suggest that attachment style is relatively stable from childhood to adulthood (Berlin & Cassidy, 2002; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Furthermore, Pietromonaco and Feldman Barrett (1997, 2000), investigating the link between attachment style and everyday social interactions, found that coexistent multiple attachment models correlate with interactions and contexts relevant for attachment and, and that attachment style can be determined by intimacy and affectivity in interpersonal relationships (Laurenceau, Pietromonaco, & Feldman Barrett, 1998). In particular, through the AAI, it is possible to assess attachment phenomena that do not rely on conscious self-evaluation, emphasizing a person's ability to reflect on his/her inner world and the perceived intentions or subjective experiences of others and of her/his context, including organizational settings (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

3. The relation between adult attachment style and organizational commitment

Allen and Meyer (1990) suggested that organizational commitment is a psychological state that has three components: affective, normative and continuance. Affective commitment refers to an individual's identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to an organization; normative commitment reflects a feeling of loyalty toward the organization based on a perceived obligation to be loyal; and continuance commitment is a tendency to maintain one's membership of the organization based on recognition of the costs associated with departure (Allen & Meyer, 1996). Commitment to organization is experienced as a psychological state that binds employee toward a particular course of action (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) that reflects her/his affective connection with the organization, although that which constitutes the basis for such attachment is still under debate in organizational research (Meyer et al., 2002). In particular, research on organizational commitment has not focused specifically on the underlying dimensions of psychological attachment to the organization. Secure attachment in AAI is likely to be associated with the acquisition and use of self-regulatory and interpersonal skills (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). If so, security is likely to be associated with positive experiences in organizations and positive attitudes toward them. By contrast, insecure employees, who lack self-regulation, interpersonal coordination, and

prosocial orientation, can have problems committing themselves to an organization and engaging in productive organizational behavior. Consistent with these arguments, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) found that insecure attachment orientations (both avoidance and anxiety) were correlated with lower levels of organizational commitment, prosocial action, and spontaneous productive behaviors.

Richards and Schat (2011) have explicitly investigated the relationship between affective commitment and adult attachment style. They found a negative relationship between affective commitment and avoidant and preoccupied styles. Their paper, despite having considerable impact in the scientific community, analyzes attachment style using the ECR (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), which only takes into account the two insecure attachment styles. Recently, Scrima (2014) showed that a secure attachment style is positively correlated with the affective and normative components of commitment, and that preoccupied and avoidant attachment styles are negatively correlated with affective commitment.

As Hazan and Shaver (1990) argued, secure attachment is likely to promote effective workplace behavior, marked by a sense of confidence and by positive relationships with coworkers; hence, this attachment style may be related to the affective dimension of organizational commitment, which refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in an organization.

Also, attachment theory highlights the link between attachment anxiety and negative working models of self; that is, preoccupied individuals tend to perceive the self as unworthy and inadequate, leading to an obsessive need for assurance from others, overdependence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005), and hyper-vigilance to social and emotional cues from others (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006). So, we may argue that preoccupied individual can be committed to an organization because she/he perceives a high cost of losing organizational membership.

At last, attachment avoidance is linked to negative working models of others; that is, to the tendency to perceive others as unavailable and untrustworthy. Individuals characterized by avoidant attachment view others as unavailable, unresponsive, or punishing (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005, 2007). So, they are likely to suppress or inhibit the affective experience of being committed to; at least they will feel they ought to do so (normative commitment), but she or he will not feel affectively committed to their organization.

In accordance, the following hypotheses were formulated regarding differences for employees' commitment to their organization across secure, avoidant and preoccupied attachment style assessed by AAI.

H1a. Affective commitment is higher among the secure as compared with the avoidant and preoccupied attachment style;

H1b. Normative commitment is higher among the avoidant as compared with the secure and preoccupied attachment style;

H1c. Continuance commitment is higher among the preoccupied as compared with the avoidant and secure attachment style.

4. The relation between adult attachment style and adult attachment in the workplace

In the working environment, Hazan and Shaver (1990) argued that people seek the maintenance of proximity. In particular, adults with a secure attachment style assess their relationships in the workplace positively and have few work-related fears. Conversely, preoccupied people have a strong interest in maintaining proximity with co-workers and express a significant fear of rejection due to poor performance, suggesting that admiration and acceptance are the main reasons that drive their work behavior. Finally, adults with an avoidant attachment style use work to avoid social interactions and, although showing mean job