Burnout Research

Research Article

Attachment styles at work: Measurement, collegial relationships, and burnout[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Although the potential deleterious effects of negative social interactions at work have been well established in the literature, the impact of personal factors in forming work relationships has been relatively neglected. Therefore, using a survey of 1624 Canadian healthcare providers, we examined the extent to which attachment styles at work were associated with the quality of social relationships. We found support for a new measure of attachment styles at work that differentiated between anxiety and avoidance attachment. Avoidance was negatively correlated with positive social constructs (civility, psychological safety, and trust) and with the efficacy dimension of burnout. Overall, compared to attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety was more strongly correlated with experienced and instigated workplace incivility, exhaustion, and cynicism. Attachment avoidance was negatively correlated with positive social constructs (civility, psychological safety, and trust) and with the efficacy dimension of burnout. Adding these two attachment dimensions to a model of burnout as a function of workload, value congruence, and coworker incivility significantly improved its fit. This study suggests that employees with high attachment anxiety tend to be more closely involved in work relationships and processes, but this closeness comes at a cost in that they experience more strain when participating in social encounters.

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1. Introduction

Much of contemporary work occurs in a social context. Healthcare work is especially social in that employees work in teams that call for ongoing contact among colleagues, managers, and members of other professions or workgroups. Furthermore, most work in healthcare settings directly or indirectly pertains to patient care, often requiring interactions with patients and their families. Even if this work generally goes smoothly, employees regularly encounter strained social interactions with colleagues, other professionals, managers, and patients (Pearson & Porath, 2009) that may lead to negative individual outcomes, such as strain and burnout (Leiter, Day, Laschinger, & Gilin-Oore, 2012). To some extent, employees call upon their professional training and life experience to manage difficult social circumstances. Personal capabilities and resources permit some employees to function, or even thrive, despite strained social encounters. However, personal constraints, such as persistent mistrust, can negatively influence thoughts about cooperating with colleagues. In developmental and social psychology, one of the key theories of developing effective social relationships is attachment theory. Although attachment has been used to explain individual differences in emotional and physical reactions to stress, styles of coping, and thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a variety of interpersonal relationship situations (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Miller, 2007), it has been only recently applied to understanding interpersonal relationships at work.

This relative lack of attention in the organizational literature, however, should not be misconstrued as it being unimportant in our understanding of work relationships. In fact, because of their ability to influence the quality of adult relationships, attachment styles must be considered as an important part of social relationships at work (Collins & Read, 1990), and therefore, has relevance to workplace relationships. For example, a recent article published in Financial Times highlights how executives often become an 'emotional dumping ground' for employees due to the tendency of employees to implicitly recreate early relationships in the workplace (Shragai, 2014, para. 18). Executives can be left feeling somewhat ill-informed in how to deal with the emotional

spillover from employees (Shragai, 2014). As such, a more developed understanding of attachment theory may be beneficial in understanding social relationships, and the related emotions, at work. Therefore, we explored the efficacy of using attachment theory in the workplace to help explain social relationships and predict individual outcomes. More specifically, we examined the potential of this theory to explain healthcare providers' experience of the social context of their workplace by developing and validating a measure of attachment at work, and examining the relationships between attachment and burnout and civility outcomes. That is, we: (1) introduce a new measure of workplace attachment; (2) link attachment styles to workplace social encounters; (3) link attachment styles to job burnout; and (4) expand a model of job burnout to encompass attachment styles.

1.1. Social relationships at work

There is convincing evidence that social relationships at work have a significant impact on individual health, strain, and burnout (Day & Leiter, 2014; Leiter & Patterson, 2014). Not only is greater social support associated with encountering few distressing demands, but social support buffers the stressful impact of demands when they are encountered (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). In contrast, uncivil or abusive social encounters are exhausting in themselves and may contribute to spirals of increasing distress that is associated with further unpleasant social encounters at work (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Although research has focused primarily on organizational factors associated with poor social relationships at work, it also has considered individual factors associated with displaying or receiving negative social behavior at work (Cortina, 2008; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). An incivility spiral encompasses processes in which the emotional impact of receiving incivility prompts people to exhibit incivility toward others. Models explaining spirals emphasize the social dynamics and workplace values pertaining to civil behavior (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Fortunately, there also is a potential for positive spirals, in which receiving civil behavior prompts people to experience positive emotions and to exhibit more civility in return (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Less attention has been given to identifying personal characteristics that may be associated with incivility. However, the construct of incivility has special relevance on this point because the subjective nature of assessing its occurrence. Because the formal definition of the construct acknowledges ambiguous intent, the characterization of a behavior as uncivil lies entirely with the recipient of that behavior (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Neither the intention of the actor nor a standardized description of rude social behaviors indicates whether a behavior is uncivil. In related research, personal characteristics impact one's perceptions and experiences. For example, negative affectivity may increase recipients' perception of bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011) and incivility (Penney & Spector, 2005). In a comprehensive meta-analysis of workplace harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), the only individual difference variable with a consistent relationship with harassment was negative affectivity. The authors reflected that the research to that point was inconclusive regarding the extent to which negative affectivity predisposed employees to harassment or resulted from the experience of harassment. They also speculated on potential connections of personality characteristics—conscientiousness and agreeableness specifically—to workplace mistreatment but found little research examining these possible links. Aquino and Thau (2009) found a similar pattern regarding victimization from workplace aggression. They found the most enduring relationships to be with negative affectivity and concurred that the extant research offered little insight on the extent to which negative affectivity was a precursor or consequence of experiencing aggression. The

research on the links of victimization with the big five personality characteristics was inconclusive and contradictory, but there was some support for self-esteem having consistent negative relationships with victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Information about personal dispositions that are closely associated with the way people perceive and cognitively process social relationships could provide more specific directions for developing a model of workplace social behavior than the general construct of negative affectivity.

One reason for the inconsistent results regarding the connections of personal characteristics with experiences of mistreatment may be the general nature of the personal characteristics studied. For example, only one of the big five personality characteristics, agreeableness, directly references social qualities. In contrast, the core dimensions of attachment explicitly reference social perception and social behavior. As such, they may have a greater potential for establishing links with employees' experience of their workplace social environments.

1.2. Attachment theory

Attachment theory suggests that individuals are innately predisposed to seek out comfort and safety from an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). Constructs from attachment theory may explain how individuals perceive, react to, and cope with stress arising from interpersonal relationships (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995). Depending on the consistency of care in times of stress, individuals develop internal working models of self and others and a relatively stable pattern of stress response known as attachment style. According to attachment theory, individuals who have experienced consistent and supportive care from an attachment figure develop a secure attachment style (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Those who experience inconsistent availability or consistent unavailability from an attachment figure are theorized to develop an anxious or avoidant attachment style, respectively (Hazan & Shaver, 1990).

Attachment styles can be conceptualized using a two-dimensional approach in terms of avoidance of intimacy and anxiety over abandonment (Bowlby, 1969; Miller, 2007). Individuals who are on the lower end of both dimensions are described as more securely attached. Securely attached individuals have positive internal working models of both self and others: They are comfortable in relationships, have high self-efficacy in dealing with stress, and believe that others will be available to provide support when needed. Securely attached individuals tend to have better mental and physical health than insecurely attached individuals (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995).

Individuals higher on anxiety about abandonment tend to have a negative view of self (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995). They tend to be hypersensitive to signs of rejection and they have a compulsive need to be close to others. Ironically, this persistent need for closeness often prompts distance-seeking in the other person, which, in a cyclical fashion, can make those higher on anxiety attachment even needier (Miller, 2007). Furthermore, Mikulincer and Florian (1995) attributed perceived unavailability from attachment figures to an individual's perceived own unworthiness of positive regard. Additionally, individuals high on anxiety attachment are likely to avoid instigating and participating in conflicts, because it may increase chances of abandonment. Mikulincer and Florian argued that individuals who are anxious about abandonment consistently monitor their social environment for cues that support their beliefs about themselves. Furthermore, support for their beliefs is consistently sought after even if those beliefs are negative.

Individuals higher on avoidance of intimacy typically have a negative view of others. They are compulsively self-reliant because they do not trust that others will be available to them when needed, and to the same degree, they often do not want people to depend