

How does secure attachment affect job performance and job promotion? The role of social-rank behaviors

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ABSTRACT

We propose and test a model in which two social rank behaviors: Dominant-leadership and coalition-building, mediate the relations between secure attachment, job performance, and job promotion. The results of survey data collected from 131 engineers at three time points spanning on twenty nine months indicate that higher secure attachment predicts more dominant-leadership and more coalition-building behaviors which in turn lead to higher job performance and job promotion. These findings contribute to understanding one important way in which secure attachment promotes job performance and job success. Our findings further indicate gender differences in dominant-leadership and coalition building behaviors. We discuss these findings as well as their practical implications and future research directions.

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1. Introduction

There is accumulating evidence that secure attachment which represents a positive psychological strength, contributes to job performance and enables employees to work well autonomously as well as with peers (e.g., Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Although the matter of *whether* secure attachment affects job performance has received some scholarly attention, very little remains known about *how* secure attachment affects performance (Harms, 2011). With the present study, we aim to explore the contribution of two particular social-rank behaviors in transmitting the unique effects of secure attachment on work outcomes. Specifically, we examine the role of dominant-leadership and coalition-building as mediating the effect of secure attachment on job performance and job promotion among engineers. Identifying the process by which employees' secure attachment affects their job performance has been long recognized as critical for advancing understanding of the topic (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). However, an empirical examination of such process remained scarce. More importantly, many of the studies that attempted to explain how secure attachment affects job functioning focused more on attitudes (e.g., Ronen & Baldwin, 2010; Simmons, Gooty, Nelson, & Little, 2009) and less on interpersonal behaviors in the workplace. Finally, since engineering is considered a nontraditional occupational choice for women, we predict that social rank behaviors will differ by gender. Fig. 1 depicts our theoretical model.

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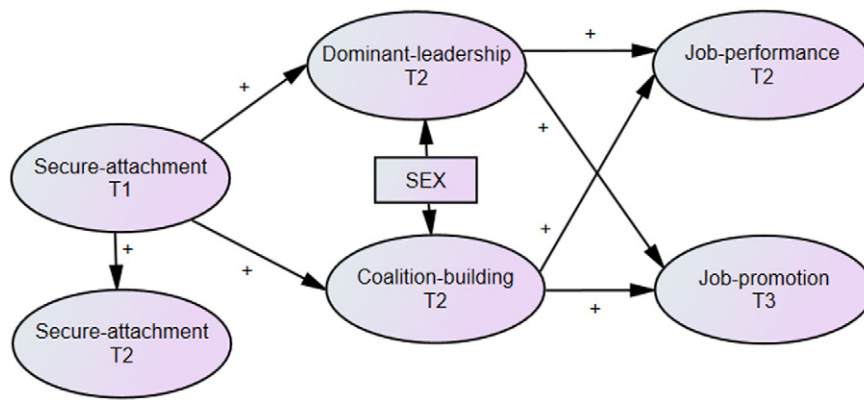


Fig. 1. Conceptual model with depicted direct effects hypotheses.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Secure attachment, job performance, and job promotion

Secure attachment represents an enduring positive psychological strength originating from supportive close relationships (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). It is often described as an individual difference attribute that is distinguished from more broad traits by uniquely defining how people view themselves and others, what motivates them, and how they behave in interpersonal settings (Wood & Hensler, 2010). According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988), secure attachment makes people feel valuable and view others as helpful and dependable, thus promotes an inner sense of *secure base* from which they can explore and master their environment (activities that are functionally similar to work-related activities, see Hazan & Shaver, 1990) without being concerned about unfulfilled attachment needs.

Much of the literature on adults' attachment has focused on individual differences in attachment orientations which according to Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) are most appropriately conceptualized as regions in a two-dimensional space (i.e., *attachment avoidance* and *attachment anxiety*). Attachment avoidance reflects the extent to which people distrust relationship partners' goodwill and strive to maintain behavioral detachment from them. Attachment anxiety reflects the degree to which people worry that others will reject them and wish to achieve utmost proximity to them. People who score high on each or both of these two dimensions are said to be insecure or have an insecure attachment orientation. People who score low on both of these dimensions are said to be secure or have a secure attachment orientation.

Building on Bowlby's theory, Hazan and Shaver (1990) examined the relations between secure attachment and job performance. They assessed work attitudes in a large sample of adults and found that securely attached people were more satisfied with several aspects of their work including: relationships with peers, job security, income, and opportunities for advancement, and they had more positive attitudes toward work. For instance, they were less likely to procrastinate, to have difficulties completing tasks, or to fear failure or rejection from co-workers. Conversely, insecure individuals reported having concerns that interfered with their productivity, being dissatisfied with co-workers, having difficulties finishing projects, being underappreciated by peers and managers, and not being awarded with desirable promotions. Hazan and Shaver (1990) concluded that insecure attachment can significantly disrupt work performance.

More recent studies add additional support for the link between secure attachment and job performance. For example, Rom and Mikulincer (2003) collected data from 600 soldiers and found that higher secure attachment predicted higher levels of team performance in two different samples. Similar results were found in a number of studies that looked at organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) at the workplace. These studies found positive relations between secure attachment and OCBs (e.g. Little, Nelson, Wallace, & Johnson, 2011) and negative relations between insecure attachment and OCBs (Desivilya, Sabag, & Ashton, 2006). Secure attachment was also found to be negatively related to counterproductive work behaviors (Little et al., 2011). Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) contend that secure attachment promotes job performance because it makes people feel capable of taking on challenges while being confident that they will get the support of others when needed. They suggest that secure individuals' confidence and tendency to trust others and to not get easily distracted by worries about their relationships make them more effective and efficient at their jobs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Research indicates that secure attachment might also be related to career advancement. For example, studies show that securely attached adolescents are more likely to commit to a particular career goal, are more aware of and more willing to overcome potential career-related obstacles, and they tend to aspire more to leadership positions within their field (e.g., Felsman & Blustein, 1999; O'Brien, 1996; Scott & Church, 2001). In accordance with these findings, other studies indicate that attachment insecurity is associated with indecisiveness regarding a career path and with lower satisfaction with one's career choice (Roney, Meredith, & Strong, 2004; Tokar, Withrow, Hall, & Moradi, 2003). Another line of support for the link between secure

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