Attachment and leadership: review and new insights

Ofra Mayseless and Micha Popper

Attachment theory has inspired a new view on the topic of leadership, enabling a better understanding of leader–follower relations by acknowledging how attachment dynamics and the evolutionary foundations of human relationships apply in organizational contexts. Early research mainly focused on individual differences and demonstrated the association between attachment orientations (security, anxiety, and avoidance) the emergence of leaders and their behaviors (i.e., leadership style). More recent research has focused on the attachment orientations of both leaders and followers, the role of moderating and mediating variables, and the provision of secure-base support and caring orientations of leaders. However, recent research on 'followership' highlights the centrality of leader competence and followers' capacity to identify, and willingness to follow, leaders who demonstrate this quality. We analyze the significance of competence in the context of attachment and leadership and suggest a new Care and Competence Model based on evolutionary claims.

Address
University of Haifa, Israel

Corresponding author: Mayseless, Ofra (ofram@edu.haifa.ac.il)

Introduction

In this paper, we present the core tenets of the connection between attachment theory and leadership. We also review the relevant literature which has mainly focused on the interplay between attachment orientations and leader–follower relations. Our review suggests that in the preceding seven years following the last major review, there has been little by way of extensive theoretical and empirical work on this subject. Based on new developments in the study of 'followership,' we offer insights that can open up new conceptual and empirical avenues that may further advance the integration between attachment theory and leadership models.

Core tenets of the connection between attachment theory and leadership

The application of attachment theory to the study of adult relationships has inspired research into a diverse range of relationship contexts including leadership and leader–follower relations [1–4]. The main tenet underpinning the link between adult attachment and leadership is that the emotional aspects of leader–follower relations reflect attachment dynamics analogous to those that characterize infants and children with their caregivers. Such similarity rests on evolutionary foundations where a needy figure (e.g. small or immature) is phylogenetically ready motivationally and by having specific innate mechanisms to form emotional attachment relations with a *stronger and wiser other* (see Table 1 for a summary of the major tenets of this view).

In this respect, attachment theory provided a much needed explanation for the often strong emotional ties between followers and leaders, noted in the literature [4,5] — ties that are more visible in times of uncertainty and crisis [5]. Likening the leader to a parental figure served to shed light on a variety of leader–follower relational dynamics [e.g., 6].

Review of research on attachment and leadership

Previous research in this domain showed, as expected, that most leaders tend to have a secure attachment style and that this is associated with positive leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, socialized charismatic leadership, and relational-oriented leadership. Leaders' security was also associated with effectiveness and with positive outcomes for followers (e.g., felt security and well-being) [see reviews in [7,8,9•]].

Studies in the past seven years focused on more nuanced aspects of individual differences in attachment orientations of leaders and followers and examined the operation of moderating and mediating aspects. For example, Richards and Hackett [10] demonstrated that attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance of both followers and leaders affected their own report of the quality of leader–member exchanges (LMX) but not the report of their work colleague (either leader or follower respectively). In addition, they underscored the importance of emotion regulation strategies, demonstrating that the use of reappraisal and suppression by either leaders or subordinates with attachment anxiety contributed to higher quality LMX.

Similarly, Kafetsios *et al.* [11] found that in organizations, supervisors' anxious attachment orientation was

---

Table 1

Core tenets of the attachment–leadership connection

- Emotional aspects of the leader–follower relations reflect attachment dynamics.
- There is a resemblance between attachment of infants and children to caregivers and attachment of followers to leaders.
- Specifically, followers/children turn to the caregiver/leader in times of distress for comfort, safety, and security (the safe haven function) and rely on caregivers/leaders to feel secure and safe when there is no distress, knowing that the caregiver/leader can be relied upon if needed (the secure base function).
- Such similarity rests on evolutionary foundations where a needy figure (e.g. a small child or an immature figure) is phylogenetically ready motivationally and by having specific innate mechanisms to form emotional attachment relations with a stronger and wiser other who is sensed as able to provide protection and security.
- Leaders fulfill an evolutionary basic need for protection that is originally activated in the parent-child relationship and later in other relations, including leader–follower relationships.
- Internalized parental representations and attachment orientations play out in leader–follower relationship quality and in preferences for specific types of leaders.
- The leadership–followership relationship is conceived an important arena for fulfilling basic evolutionary-based needs for protection and security and this is more visible in times of distress.

---

associated with subordinates' lower positive affect and satisfaction at work, demonstrating the distinct effect of leaders or supervisors attachment style on subordinates' outcomes. Contrary to the authors' hypotheses, supervisors' higher avoidance was associated with better rather than worse subordinates' outcomes. Supervisors' emotion regulation capabilities had an independent effect on outcomes and did not mediate the attachment to outcomes link. Finally, Ronen and Mikulincer [12] demonstrated that managers' and subordinates' attachment insecurities were associated with subordinates' burnout and job dissatisfaction and that managers' ineffective caring orientation (i.e., hyperactivated caregiving) mediated these links.

Research has also examined the attachment style of followers' their preferences and perceptions of leaders. For example, Shalit *et al.* [13] found that secure individuals preferred *socialized* charismatic leaders (leaders who use power to benefit others and have prosocial and humanistic orientation such as Gandhi) whereas avoidant individuals preferred *personalized* charismatic leaders (leaders who use power to serve primarily their own interests and often have malevolent orientation such as Charles Manson). In an exploratory laboratory study, Hansbrough [14] found that individuals high in attachment anxiety perceived elements of transformational leadership even though these elements were objectively absent.

More recently, in a cross-cultural study including samples from the US and China, Wu and Parker [15•] directly investigated the *universal* attachment dynamics of leader–follower relations (i.e., the provision by the leader of a secure base that includes personal support, availability when assistance or communication is needed and encouragement of autonomous conduct). They demonstrated that secure-base support in the form of leader availability, encouragement, and noninterference was positively associated with employees' proactive work behavior, such as exerting effort and suggesting new ideas to improve

workplace procedures. Employees' role breadth self-efficacy and autonomous motivation mediated this link, and these beneficial effects were especially prominent among individuals low on attachment security. Specifically, among individuals high on attachment anxiety, leaders' support positively affected role breadth self-efficacy, and among individuals high on attachment avoidance, leaders' support positively affected autonomous behavior.

In addition, a recent review has underscored the contributions of attachment theory to the field of *management scholarship*. This is a related but distinct field to that of leadership that integrates work relationships with human resource management [9•]. As part of this review Yip *et al*. [9•], indicate that research to date has focused on individual differences in attachment orientations and aspects of their development.

Addressing the phylogenetic aspect (the universal evolutionary base of human development) as Wu and Parker [15•] have done can provide a significant additional perspective [16]. Advances in theory and research in the leadership arena focusing in particular on followership [17–19] and adopting an evolutionary perspective that underscores universal processes of followership [20,21•,22] can provide new and exciting insights on leader–follower attachment dynamics.

Attachment and trust in leaders: an evolutionary perspective

In recent years, research in the field of leadership has shifted to a great extent from focusing on leaders to investigating followers [17–19]. This shift reflects a transition to questions such as: Do we each have an inherent need to be led or to follow leaders? Why those who are attracted to leaders feel that some people are leaders more than others [20]?

Arguments have been developed and presented that deal with understanding the primary foundations of