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HR systems, attachment styles with leaders, and the creativity–innovation nexus

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to bring together literature on strategic human resource management and leadership and theorize about their cross-level interplay. Specifically, we offer propositions in relation to the interactive influence of attachment styles that followers perceive to have developed in their dyadic relationship with their leaders/supervisors and HR systems on individual innovation processes. We narrow in on three leadership attachment styles perceived by employees (secure, anxious, and avoidant) and two opposite HR systems in organizations (compliance and commitment) in order to propose that their interactions have different roles in predicting two different elements of employees' innovative work behavior: idea generation and idea implementation behaviors. Our theorizing results in a conceptual model and a matrix of 12 specific propositions about potentially promoting (complementing or positively supplementing) or inhibiting (in the case of no fit or negative supplement) multiple effects of different combinations of attachment styles and HR systems. We conclude by discussing suggestions for future research, methodological considerations, and practical implications.

1. Introduction

The innovation process at the individual (employee) level is complex, consisting of two major phases – idea generation and implementation – with different demands related to resources, mindsets and required skills (cf. Baer, 2012; Montag, Maertz, & Baer, 2012; Škerlavaj, Černe, & Dysvik, 2014). The role of human resource (HR) management as a strategic partner in organizations has been emphasized in the extant HR literature, and linked with innovation as well, albeit only recently, and is portrayed as a contextual top-down catalyst for innovation (Shipton, Sanders, Bednall, Lin, & Escibá-Carda, 2016; Wang, Guidice, Tansky, & Wang, 2010). In line with the devolution-to-the-line perspective in HR (Perry & Kulik, 2008), the role of immediate supervisors is becoming increasingly important for work performance, with respect to shaping the context of work and immediately influencing it. We thus know that we need both leaders and the HR system to work together in order to foster innovation. However, the existing literature fails to clearly answer how leadership interacts with HR, which should act as a co-creator of how employees perceive their relationships with their supervisors (Garavan, Watson, Carbery, & O'Brien, 2015; Gustafsson, Abbey, & Hope Hailey, 2016) and what the outcomes of such interactions are.

We draw from attachment theory, which provides a dynamic and interpersonal perspective to leadership studies (Popper, Mayseless, & Castelnovo, 2000). Attachment styles describe relational schemas that correspond to strategies of affect regulation,

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which result from different patterns of interactions that followers have with their supervisors (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Hinojosa, Davis McCauley, Randolph-Seng, & Gardner, 2014; Keller, 2003). Applied to leadership, attachment theory is based on beliefs about both oneself and others (Manning, 2003) that help followers interpret their dyadic interactions with leaders. Narrowing in on two opposite HR systems in organizations (compliance and commitment) and three leadership attachment styles perceived by the employees (secure, anxious, and avoidant), we propose that their cross-level interactions have different roles in predicting two different elements of employees' innovative work behavior: idea generation and idea implementation behaviors, respectively.

We theorize about the potentially attenuating or accentuating effects of HR systems on the attachment style typology, proposing either a complementary or a supplementary fit (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987) between the two, depending on particular interactions. In other words, we conceptualize the interplay between followers' perceptions of the leadership attachment style and HR system, either as supplementary (possessing similar or matching characteristics, which can lead to either a positive or a negative joint effect) or complementary (when the weaknesses of the attachment style are offset by the strength of the context or vice versa, making the effect enhancing) fit, or a situation of no fit when neither of the congruence types can be claimed. While the traditional notion of person-environment fit would be in favor of supplementary fit, where leaders should be in line with the HR systems in enacting HR policies, we argue that in some instances, linked with specific characteristics of each stage of the micro-innovation process, models of complementary fit, and potential discordance, are more beneficial.

With our conceptual paper, we intend to contribute to the body of literature placed at the intersection between leadership and HRM in three ways. Firstly, our study goes beyond either the traditional focus on transactional–transformational leadership, where the focus is on the leader's behavior toward the followers (task or people oriented) or the concentration on specific leadership styles, such as authentic, servant, or ethical leadership (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009), in stimulating innovative work behavior. The processes of leadership influence can be captured through those perspectives, but are more one-way, leader-centric, and exclude the follower from that perspective (Shamir, 2007) and thus do not reflect both parties involved in an exchange relationship. Rather, we look into attachment styles, which enable us to look at the dyadic relationships between leaders and others by accounting for interpersonal premises about oneself and others at the same time (Manning, 2003; Popper et al., 2000), specifically narrowing in on how followers make sense and interpret these dyadic interactions in order to co-construct leadership. Attachment styles thus describe a unique array of understanding relations at work by simultaneously accounting for both relational dynamics and individual differences (Davidovitz et al., 2007; Popper & Amit, 2009). Such an approach not only enables us to understand a full spectrum of leadership approaches but also predominantly focuses on how immediate supervisors are connected with their employees, thus looking at the leadership process, leader–follower relations and reactions, and follower perceptions of these associations simultaneously.

Because of this relational nature of leadership attachment styles, followers' perceptions of leader–member exchange (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) are similar to the interactive logic of long-term bonds that develop between supervisors and their employees. Although secure attachment style and LMX or social LMX (Kuvaas, Buch, Dysvik, & Haerem, 2012) share similar characteristics of mutual trust, long-term orientation, and collegial relations based on caring and development, attachment theory provides two more styles that cannot be seen as mere opposites of low levels of LMX. Anxious and avoidant attachment styles include specific elements of followers perceiving leaders as prioritizing their own emotions and needs and seeking attention and appreciation (in the case of anxious attachment), or to be insensitive and uncaring, thereby ignoring followers' and others' attachment needs (in the case of avoidant attachment). Such perceptions may or may not be present when the dyadic leader–follower relationship is characterized only by low LMX, which is why anxious and avoidant attachment styles provide a more nuanced and specific antithesis to LMX.

The choice of leadership attachment styles is particularly relevant when considering creativity and innovation as our outcomes because both have been deemed to be heavily influenced by immediate supervisors and the followers' personal characteristics (Škerlavaj et al., 2014; Zhou, 2003). Leadership attachment framework enables us to account for both simultaneously. We focus on the context (boundary conditions) of leadership attachment styles (in line with Hansbrough, 2012) with regard to HR systems. Namely, we look into how the effects of leadership attachment styles on specific elements of innovative work behavior might be shaped and molded by compliance and commitment HR systems, which activate internal interpretative models of explaining, understanding, and co-creating attachment styles in the supervisor–employee dyads. This enables us to account for the dyadic relationship, followers' sense making of this association, and its outcomes within different cross-level contextual influences.

Secondly, the investigation of HR systems within the proposed interplay with followers' perceptions of leadership attachment styles represents an important addition to the extant literature. High Performance Work Systems (HPWS), specific functional HR practices, or commitment-based HR (e.g., Chuang, Jackson, & Jiang, 2016; Klaas, Semadeni, Klimchak, & Ward, 2012; Zhu, Chew, & Spangler, 2005) have been examined in connection with leadership in predicting either creativity (idea generation) or innovation (idea implementation) (Ceylan, 2012; Chang, Jia, Takeuchi, & Cai, 2014). Existing research has also advocated for further examination of the joint influences of social and contextual forces on the innovation processes (Dul, Ceylan, & Jaspers, 2011). This represents a more explicit approach, which accounts for the fact that HR systems might be suitable for one organization but not for another (Lepak & Snell, 1999). In examining how HR systems can represent cross-level contextual conditions for the individual-level relationship between followers' perceptions of leadership attachment styles and micro innovation, we also apply a multi-level perspective (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Wright & Nishii, 2013; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008).

Thirdly, based on the notion described above, we derive from the most recent findings of the micro innovation literature that idea generation entails crucially different characteristics than idea implementation (Baer, 2012; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017; Škerlavaj et al., 2014) as well as how dyadic leadership–followership relationships within the contextual conditions of organizational systems

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