



# Leaders' and subordinates' attachment orientations, emotion regulation capabilities and affect at work: A multilevel analysis<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Two studies examined relationships between leaders' and subordinates' attachment orientations, emotion regulation capabilities, and affective experience and satisfaction at work. As expected, supervisors' and subordinates' insecure attachment orientations (higher anxiety and avoidance) were associated with own positive affect and satisfaction at work. Supervisors' anxious attachment orientation was associated with subordinates' lower positive affect and satisfaction at work. Contrary to hypotheses, supervisors' higher avoidance was associated with subordinates' lower negative affect and higher job satisfaction. Supervisors' emotion regulation capabilities did not mediate relationships between supervisors' insecure attachment orientations and supervisors' own or subordinates' affect and job satisfaction as expected. However, subordinates' emotion regulation capabilities interacted with supervisors' attachment orientations to predict subordinates' emotion experience at work. The results contribute to an understanding of attachment orientations' emotion dynamics in leader–follower interaction, pointing in particular to perceptual and affect-related processes at different levels of analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

Clearly, organizational research and theory that considers interpersonal processes and functions in leader–follower exchanges is limited (Keller, 2003). An emerging literature has applied attachment theory, one of the more comprehensive frameworks for interpersonal functioning, to understand leader characteristics and leader–follower relationships (e.g., Mayseless & Popper, 2007; Popper, 2004). Yet, existing research has neglected emotion processes and correlates of leaders' attachment orientations especially within leader–follower interactions. The present studies extend this line of research by examining how leaders' attachment orientations are related to own and to followers' emotional experience at work, job satisfaction, and emotion regulation capabilities, in a multilevel fashion and from a social-interactionist perspective (e.g., Riggio & Reichard, 2008; Zaccaro, 2007).

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## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Attachment theory and leadership

Attachment theory concerns leadership processes in at least two ways. In normative terms, both caregiver–infant and leader–follower relationships involve feelings and interpersonal dynamics around issues of security (Mayseless, 2010; Popper & Mayseless, 2003). In caregiver–infant interactions and relationships the attachment system functions so that caregivers are the providers of a “safe haven” in times of distress and a secure base for infants’ exploration (Bowlby, 1982). In a direct analogue to those normative attachment processes, leadership involves an uneven relationship between leaders and subordinates, where leaders, like parent figures, are perceived as stronger and wiser. As such, leaders can provide a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) from which subordinates can expand mentally and emotionally. In situations of stress and distress subordinates turn to their leaders for emotional comfort and advice (Keller, 2003; Popper, 2004) and this parallels the attachment system’s secure-base function. Followers’ relationship with the leader involves affective bonds that can function as prototypes for leader–follower interaction (Keller, 2003; Popper, Mayseless, & Castelnovo, 2000). Given emotions’ central role in attachment relationships, it is important to understand how attachment orientations relate to emotional correlates and outcomes in leader–follower interaction and relationships. Yet, research examining emotional correlates and functions in leader–follower interaction is scant.

Beyond the above drawn parallels, leadership processes also involve individual differences in adult attachment trait-like characteristics (attachment orientations) and the effects those individual differences have for leader–follower interactions and relationships. Interaction patterns with attachment figures established in early stages of development lead to secure and insecure attachment orientations in adulthood. These individual differences in interpersonal cognitions, emotions, and behaviors influence relating throughout the lifespan (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). Insecure (anxious or avoidant) attachment orientations involve distinct behavioral and cognitive rules and strategies that constitute basic forms of emotion regulation (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). The anxious attachment orientation is characterized by increased hyper-activation of the attachment system and corresponding emotion regulation strategies such as hyper-vigilance and overly negative reactions towards interpersonal or emotional threat. The avoidant attachment orientation on the other hand, is typically associated with the deactivation of the attachment system and with suppressing and limiting accessibility to emotional memories and thoughts (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). Those emotion regulation strategies have consequences for interpersonal interactions and relationships (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003; Mikulincer et al., 2003).

Interestingly, despite more than two decades of intensive research on adult attachment in personality and social psychology, evidence for the effects leaders’ attachment orientations have in leader–follower interactions has only recently been brought forward. These recent studies have documented consistent connections between leaders’ attachment orientations and leadership competencies. Israeli recruits who, in the beginning of training, reported higher attachment security and lower anxiety, were rated higher on leadership competence at the end of the four month training (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995). Commanders’ ratings of leadership qualities were associated with soldiers’ ratings of leaders’ attachment security (Popper, Amit, Gal, Sinai, & Lisak, 2004). Management students’ peer-rated leadership potential was associated with higher own-reported secure attachment orientation (Berson, Dan, & Yammarino, 2006). Self-reported attachment insecurity and adolescents’ teacher-rated leadership qualities were inversely related in another study (Scharf & Mayseless, 2009). Finally, secure attachment was associated with subordinates’ perceptions of leaders as transformational (Popper et al., 2000). Taken together, the above findings substantiate assertions that “individuals with insecure attachment styles (avoidant or anxious) are less suited to leadership roles” (Mayseless, 2010, p. 273).

However, much of the existing research has been mono-level, operationally as well as conceptually, not directly examining leaders’ attachment orientation effects in leader–follower exchanges (for exceptions see Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Ronen & Mikulincer, 2012). Researchers have typically extrapolated from studies that links leaders’ attachment orientations with leaders’ own characteristics to how leaders’ attachment orientations may influence subordinates’ work related outcomes. This single-level treatment of an inherently multilevel phenomenon such as attachment in leader–follower interactions is likely to result to incorrect conclusions with regard to the sources of leadership influence (Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). Importantly, there is scarce evidence on how leaders’ attachment orientations may affect patterns of emotion in leaders’ interactions with the group of followers. This is a curious oversight given, (a) the affective quality of attachment relationships outlined above and corresponding calls for understanding emotional processes in leaders’ attachment relationships with followers (Keller, 2003; Popper, 2004), (b) that attachment orientations are consistently and uniquely associated with affect outcomes (e.g., Richards & Schat, 2011; Wei, Vogel, Ku, & Zakalik, 2005) and emotion-related competencies (e.g., emotion regulation, coping strategies, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a), and (c) the importance of emotion in leader–follower exchanges (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Humphrey, 2002).

If one is to better understand how leaders’ attachment orientations influence emotional experience in leader–follower interaction one should adopt a multilevel approach (see e.g., Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Gooty et al., 2010). This point is elaborated in the next section, in the context of central frameworks for understanding emotion in leadership (the Emotions As Social Information Model, Van Kleef, 2009, and Affective Events Theory, Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) that identify processes and sources of the emotional influence at different levels.

### 2.2. Emotion in leader–follower interaction

Like others (e.g., Humphrey, 2002; Pirola-Merlo, Härtel, Mann, & Hirst, 2002), we conceptualize leadership as a process of social influence through which a leader affects subordinates’ feelings, perceptions, and behavior. This approach is theoretically

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