



# Leader and follower attachment styles: Implications for authentic leader–follower relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Authentic leadership theory posits that the authenticity of leaders and followers is influenced by their personal histories. Attachment theory states that individuals have internal working models that are influenced by both early developmental experiences and relationships later in life. These models guide how people interact with close others and tend toward three styles of attachment: secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant. We argue that securely attached persons are most likely to exhibit authentic leadership/followership. We review empirical work which suggests that secure attachment is positively related to each of the four components of authentic leadership/followership (self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective). We then develop an attachment-based typology for variations in authentic leader–follower relationships, with emphasis on relationships that include an insecurely attached party. Finally, we draw from the attachment and authentic leadership literatures to suggest interventions to foster the development of authentic leadership/followership, thereby enhancing authentic leader–follower relationships.

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*Human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise.*

[Bowlby, 1979, pp. 103–104]

## 1. Introduction

Much wisdom is reflected by this quote from John Bowlby, the founder of attachment theory. Bowlby recognized that people are most fulfilled and able to apply their talents to achieve excellence when they trust others are there to support them. Having the confidence to recognize and use personal strengths reflects Polonius's adage from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "To thine own self be true." This adage has inspired a new approach to leadership, authentic leadership (AL), which has been increasingly embraced by practitioners (George, 2003) and scholars (Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, & Dickens, 2011) alike over the past decade. Authentic leaders understand who they are and attempt to foster congruence between their internal talents, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs and their externally-oriented actions (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). That is, leaders who remain "true to the self," experience a sense of authenticity that is accompanied by feelings of well-being (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Ilies, Morgeson,

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& Nahrgang, 2005). Conversely, when a lack of internal–external congruency arises, the leader is unable to achieve authenticity and adverse psychological consequences may accrue (Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

Authentic leaders also support followers as they strive to achieve their own authenticity (Gardner et al., 2005). Such support is consistent with Bowlby's recognition that a secure relationship with close others promotes knowledge and confidence in one's abilities and provides a safe environment for people to apply those abilities. Indeed, given the focus of AL development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) on fostering congruence between the intra- and interpersonal processes of leaders and followers, we posit that the attachment styles of both parties (as part of their internal working model; Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971; Bowlby, 1969, 1988) influence the authenticity of their relationship. AL theory asserts that through positive modeling, authentic leaders can help followers develop their authenticity, and as a result create authentic leader–follower relationships (Gardner et al., 2005). However, we propose that the follower's attachment style is equally important since, according to AL theory, leader and follower authenticity is essential to the attainment of an authentic leader–follower relationship (Gardner et al., 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Attachment theory asserts that individuals form an attachment style—secure, insecure-ambivalent, or insecure-avoidant—toward primary caregivers early in life, and this attachment style becomes an internal working model (i.e., a schema/script) for interactions in future relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1971; Bowlby, 1969, 1988). The central premise of attachment theory is that caregivers who encourage children to develop a healthy independence will enable them to form secure attachment styles that will, in turn, facilitate the future development of healthy adult relationships in their private and professional lives (Bowlby, 1988). In contrast, children who are unable to form secure relationships with caregivers may find it difficult to develop secure personal and work relationships as adults (Bowlby, 1979). While the foundational attachment research focused on infants and their relationships with caregivers, later research has explored its implications for adults (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), romantic relationships (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998; Pistole, 1989), supervisor–subordinate relationships (Simmons, Gooty, Nelson, & Little, 2009), co-workers (Nelson, Quick, & Joplin, 1991) and leaders (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Keller, 2003; Popper, 2002; Popper & Amit, 2009; Popper & Maysel, 2003; Popper, Maysel, & Castelnovo, 2000). Recent research suggests that while initial attachment styles can have a great impact on attachment in future relationships, relationship-specific attachment styles can also develop (Fraleigh, 2007). According to Fraleigh's (2007) work on the connectionist model of attachment, the attachment style enacted in a relationship is determined by the relative salience of the various attachment models a person has formed in other relationships. For example, in a relationship with a co-worker, the person's relationships with other co-workers are more likely to be salient than their relationships with parents. Thus, the attachment style one developed early in life with a parent may exert less influence in this situation than the attachment style with co-workers. Nevertheless, both of these relationship-specific styles may play a role in determining the attachment style enacted in this particular work relationship. In other words, although the child's attachment to a parent sets an important path for the development of an attachment working model, this model is not deterministic and is therefore open to change across and within different relationships (Fraleigh, 2007; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000).

While attachment theory has been applied in leadership research, many implications of attachment theory for the field of leadership have yet to be explored (Harms, 2011). The emerging field of AL scholarship is one such area that may benefit from the application of this perspective. Attachment theory is particularly promising for the refinement of AL theory because there is extensive theory and research linking attachment styles to authenticity (e.g., Brunnel et al., 2010; Gillath, Sesku, Shaver, & Chun, 2010; Lemay & Clark, 2008). Because persons with secure attachment styles have been shown to achieve greater authenticity in their lives and relationships, we expect these findings to generalize to leader and follower roles within organizations. Indeed, the connection between authenticity and secure attachment styles was highlighted in Kernis and Goldman's (2006) introduction of the multicomponent model of authenticity. Moreover, when the form of leadership enacted is authentic, leaders are posited to experience: 1) higher levels of personal well-being; 2) more positive, open and transparent relationships with followers; and 3) higher and more sustainable levels of performance (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005). Given the empirical and theoretical overlap, an exploration of the implications of attachment theory for the field of AL is warranted.

The purpose of this paper is to apply the extensive theoretical and empirical literature on attachment styles to introduce a new lens for understanding the factors that contribute to authentic leader–follower relationships. In particular, our paper makes four key contributions to the authentic leadership literature. First, we elaborate on the assertion of AL scholars (e.g., Gardner et al., 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005) that personal histories impact authentic leadership/followership by explicating the processes whereby attachment styles influence leader and follower authenticity. Second, by focusing on how the attachment styles of leaders and followers create a context that may support or undermine authentic leadership/followership, we answer calls of AL (e.g., Avolio, 2005; Gardner et al., 2011) and leadership scholars in general (Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, & Johnson, 2011) to devote more attention to followers and the leadership context. Third, we identify various combinations of leader–follower attachment styles and introduce a typology based on how these combinations influence variations in authentic leader–follower relationships. Finally, we draw from the authentic leadership and attachment styles literatures to suggest various developmental interventions that could facilitate attachment security in leaders and followers. In the process, we describe specific techniques for fostering leader and follower authenticity, as well as more authentic leader–follower relationships, which proponents of AL development (Avolio & Wernsing, 2008) have advocated.

<sup>1</sup> Our theoretical development and propositions focus on leader and follower roles. Thus, a person may occupy both roles, in different contexts. Therefore, the propositions apply to the roles of leader and follower within a particular dyad.

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