Attachment and responses to employment dissolution

Lumina S. Albert, David G. Allen, Jonathan E. Biggane, Qing (Kathy) Ma

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords:
Attachment
Employment dissolution
Relationship dissolution
Employee turnover
Job loss

A B S T R A C T

We propose that theory and research on how individuals deal with loss or potential loss of personal relationships can inform our understanding of how employees deal with the loss or potential loss of the employment relationship. In particular, we examine the possibility that attachment theory—which plays a central role in explaining an individual’s affective, cognitive and behavioral response to the loss of central close relationships—may explain the psychological mechanisms and behavioral reactions associated with the loss of an employment relationship. A key tenet underlying attachment theory is the idea that people develop internal models of attachment, which determine how individuals handle a variety of life’s adversities, including but not confined to relationship loss. This research provides a theoretical perspective suggesting that the psychological and physiological effects of job loss may perhaps be related to the emotional trauma, grief and abandonment associated with the loss of the “employment relationship”, rather than the financial and social strains associated with the job loss. Further, our research also suggests that strong psychological ties with the organization are not always associated with positive outcomes for the organization, specifically, in the event of employment dissolution. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Secure relationships are a source of deep comfort, healing and well-being for any individual. They are critical determinants of an individual’s happiness and play a central role in regulating their emotional well-being and social behavior (Bowlby, 1980; Cozolino, 2006). Relatedly, the loss of an important relationship is one of the most devastating and painful events in life—one that often elicits powerful emotional reactions such as anxiety, despair, sadness and anger (Fraley & Bonanno, 2004; Wortman & Silver, 1989). This loss is often associated with long-term negative psychological and physiological effects such as chronic depression, immune suppression, heart disease, high-blood pressure, and decreased longevity due to suicide or homicide (Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987).

In organizational settings, individuals are often faced with the loss or potential loss of the employment relationship. Examples include organizational restructuring, downsizing, layoffs, performance-based termination, termination for other reasons (e.g. policy violations), and mandatory retirement. While there exists a significant body of research examining the effects of job loss on individuals (e.g., Kinicki & Latack, 1990), particularly on employees’ coping responses to job loss (e.g., proactive search for new employment, positive self-assessment, and job devaluation) and potential job loss (e.g., Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2012), this research has not considered the extent to which the loss of an employment relationship is similar to the loss of an intimate personal relationship and how this seemingly disparate body of literature may inform our understanding of the dissolution of employment relationships.

Like any intimate interpersonal relationship, an employment relationship involves deep emotional ties, psychological attachment, personal investments, common identification, and a sense of common obligation (Buchanan, 1975; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982;
likely that these early interactions have in
sible links to one's early social interactions and close relationship experiences (Hardy & Barkham, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1990). It is
and feelings of abandonment and grief associated with the loss of
Kasl, 1977; Fryer & Payne, 1986), research has not considered that these outcomes may perhaps be related to the emotional trauma,
dynamics are part of existing relationships (e.g., with spouses, co-workers, organizations, and products). Specifically, individuals de-
velop attachment models that guide their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies in their interpersonal relationships. More-
over, these internal models function as inner structures upon which individuals organize, respond to, and handle a variety of life’s
adversities, including but not exclusively confined to relationship loss.

The implications of examining whether individuals utilize these same internal models to respond to the potential loss of an em-
ployment are manifold. First, existing research on job loss focuses heavily on the economic discrepancies and financial strain gener-
ated by job loss (Kessler et al., 1988). Even when the psychological and physiological effects of job loss are considered (e.g., Cobb &
Kasl, 1977; Fryer & Payne, 1986), research has not considered that these outcomes may perhaps be related to the emotional trauma,
and feelings of abandonment and grief associated with the loss of the “relationship”, rather than the financial and social strains associ-
ated with the job loss.

Second, given the important role that employment dissolution plays in the well-being and, more generally, the lives of most indi-
viduals, little is known about the individual-level determinants of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses and outcomes
associated with this important life-event. While some research has used qualitative case studies to describe the emotional reactions
associated with employment dissolution (Jahoda et al., 1933), very little research has examined and explained this from a theoretical
perspective (for a review see Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995).

Third, researchers have called for identifying factors that determine the selection of coping strategies in the event of employment
loss (e.g., Kinicki & Latack, 1990). For example, Fugate et al.’s (2012) research on coping with impending organizational restructuring
considers cognitive appraisal as the key psychological mechanism explaining individual reactions. Attachment theory broadens this
perspective by explaining the foundations of individual cognitive appraisals, and also addressing the origins of emotional and behav-
ioral reactions to employment dissolution.

Finally, increasing our understanding of the role of attachment models may help employees experiencing job loss and their organi-
zational representatives managing these issues, by providing them with information to develop proactive strategies that will abate
some of the destructive outcomes associated with involuntary turnover. For example, attachment theory may help us answer ques-
tions such as ‘who expresses the most distress when the relationship ends?’, ‘who makes a peaceful exit?’, ‘who obsesses about hurt-
ing the organization after the relationship has ended?’, ‘who chooses to maintain their relationship with the organization?’, and even
‘whose behaviors make them a likely candidate for dissolution?’

In what follows, we begin by explaining attachment theory and reviewing relevant literature linking attachment to work-related
behaviors. We then discuss the importance of attachment in understanding employment dissolution experiences. Further, we inte-
grate concepts from attachment and relationships to explain cognitions, affective reactions, and behaviors associated with employ-
ment dissolution, and develop meaningful propositions useful for future empirical investigations. We integrate these bodies of
literature to make important advancements in theory, and conclude with a discussion of important implications relevant to organiza-
tional and human resource management.

1. Internal models for love and work

The themes of love and work are central to human existence, and regarded as powerful determinants of psychological well-being
in theory (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961) as well as in empirical research for the past few decades (e.g., Baruch et al.,
1983; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Lee & Kanungo, 1984). Additionally, research has revealed that an individual’s experiences of love and
work are not “separate” (e.g., Kanter, 1977; Piotrowski, 1978) but in reality, inextricably blended with each other, and may have pos-
sible links to one’s early social interactions and close relationship experiences (Hardy & Barkham, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1990). It is
likely that these early interactions have influenced the development of particular stances towards relationships within individuals,
which determine the nature of all kinds of relationships — those with intimate others, their employing organizations and the products they use (Albert, Reynolds, & Turan, 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a; Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012).

Attachment theory, based on the works of John Bowlby (1969, 1980, 1982), posits that individuals are born with innate needs for closeness with attachment figures, and naturally express behaviors that attract and maintain proximity with them to protect themselves against threats. When the desired proximity with their attachment figure is achieved and the supportive other is available and responsive, the individual feels secure. In contrast, when the desired proximity is not achieved, and when the other is unresponsive or unavailable, the individual experiences insecurity and distress.

Based on these repeated early experiences with caregivers, individual differences emerge resulting in the formation of a dominant attachment style in adulthood which tends to remain relatively stable across one's lifespan. This mental representation (or working model) represents a personality feature that determines stable patterns of expectations, needs, affective regulation, emotional experiences, and behavioral tendencies during adulthood (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), the effects of which are above and beyond the explanatory powers of high-order personality traits such as the Big Five traits and situational factors (Shaver & Brennan, 1992).

Originally, attachment was conceptualized in the form of a three- (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) or a four- (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) category typology. More recently, some consensus has emerged that a two-dimensional conceptualization consisting of attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety represents the underlying structure of attachment more accurately (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). Avoidance represents a negative view of others as unreliable and untrustworthy. It reflects a fear of personal intimacy in relationships and discomfort with interpersonal closeness. Anxiety represents a negative view of the self (i.e., that the self is unworthy of love and responsiveness from important others), and reflects a fear of rejection and abandonment (Brennan et al., 1998).

The interactions of these two dimensions describe four attachment styles. Secure individuals are low on both dimensions. Preoccupied individuals are high on anxiety and low on avoidance. Dismissing individuals are high on avoidance and low on anxiety. Fearful individuals are high on both dimensions (Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Some research has indicated that attachment theory is not limited to explaining experiences in interpersonal relationships alone, but is also useful in understanding one's relationships with brands (Thomson et al., 2012), peers (Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Krausz, Bizman, & Braslavsky, 2001) and possibly one's organization (Schweiger, Ivancevich, & Power, 1987). For example, Schweiger et al. (1987) suggest that when employees go through major organizational transitions, their experience is similar to the loss of attachment experienced by a child.

1.1. Attachment theory at work

Bowlby (1980) argued that attachment working models provide a motivational system for relationship bonding and coping with major life events from the ‘cradle to the grave’. However, it is only since the late 1980s that researchers demonstrated evidence that attachment theory not only is limited to love and dating relationships alone, but also serves as a theoretical framework for studying basic human functioning in adults, particularly in the fields of stress, coping, social perceptions and affect regulation in daily life (Florian, Mikulincer, & Bucholtz, 1995; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Nonetheless, despite its extensive potential applicability in predicting workplace relationships and individual adjustment to major organizational challenges, it remains relatively less investigated in organizational research (Harms, 2011).

A few studies have demonstrated that attachment models are important determinants of behaviors in work settings over and beyond the effects of other possible individual and situational factors which have been more extensively studied in work contexts (Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Kahn & Kram, 1994). For example, Albert and Horowitz (2009) demonstrated that attachment styles predicted ethical beliefs and behavior in a sample of managers. Geller and Bamberger (2009) demonstrated that attachment models predicted instrumental coworker helping behavior. To the extent employees view themselves as being in a relationship with their employing organization, attachment models may be particularly relevant for understanding the dissolution of this relationship.

Research on employment dissolution (Jones, 1979; Stybel, 1981) suggests that in the face of the loss of an employment relationship, many individuals go through stages of reactions parallel to the grief process associated with bereavement or abandonment, and other critical life transitions (e.g., Archer & Rhodes, 1993; Kubler, 1969). It is likely that these responses to the loss are related to some sort of individual-level factors that drive some to follow internal cues that determine those reactions and behavioral tendencies.

Psychological research (Bowlby, 1980; Freud, 1936) suggests that adult relationship interactions are not merely caused by the objective situation alone (Kahn & Kram, 1994; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), but by the compulsive tendencies within an individual to repeat early relationship patterns. There is a long tradition of research and theory on how these tendencies are determined by internal attachment models developed during early social interactions (Weiss, 1982). Internal attachment models set the template for how people perceive features of their relationships, and determine emotions and behavioral tendencies within those relationships (Kahn & Kram, 1994). Although this does not mean that internal models continue unabated or unchanged into adulthood, it does imply that aspects of those models continue to direct behaviors in adult relationships.

1.2. Activation of internal models

Often when individuals experience insecurity or anxiety in their immediate situation, their attachment behaviors are triggered (Bowlby, 1980), and this activation is to be expected even in the context of organizational members’ work relationships (Kahn & Kram, 1994). Attachment research suggests that adults (Weiss, 1982) selectively enact their attachment models when there is a threat
to the availability and future of their significant relationship (Bowlby, 1980; Feeney, 1998). These behaviors are often aimed at recreating their sense of security and familiarity.

Based on Bowlby’s contention that attachment behaviors are especially activated during stressful events, it is plausible to expect that adult attachment patterns would be activated during the employment dissolution experience. Moreover, as employees experience themselves as being in a relationship with the organization (Lawler, 1992) we expect their reaction to its dissolution to be consistent with their attachment systems. We develop a model (shown in Figure 1) illustrating the role of attachment dimensions in the loss or potential loss of the employment relationship for understanding the activation of attachment behaviors, cognitive appraisals, coping strategies, the seeking of social support, grief resolution, emotional and retaliatory responses, and reconciliation, that occur during the event.

Individuals faced with job loss are not just passive victims of the dissolution process, but make active choices regarding how they respond to this loss (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & Van Ryn, 1989). When employment ties are severed or threatened, employees may regress to earlier learned modes of attachment, social interactions and associated coping tendencies. In sum, to the extent that these individuals view their organizations as secure bases (Lawler, 1992; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), and perceive a relationship with their organization and its members, their attachment models are likely to be activated when this relationship is threatened.

Generally, these behaviors are expressed along the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance—which represent the template of the expectations that they have in all relationships, including their employment relationship. Consider, for example, an individual who has consistently experienced early relationships with significant figures that are inconsistent, unreliable and sometimes intrusive (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The person likely develops a deep-seated anxious need for reassurance and closeness from their relationships, and expresses chronic hypersensitivity to perceived relationship threats.

We expect anxiety to be related to these behavioral patterns in the work context as well. Anxious individuals have a tendency to interpret even mild circumstances as threatening and express a “hyper activating” response to threats. When they perceive some threat to their employment relationship, they may become hyper-vigilant of the organization’s actions, and display strong protest reactions. They tend to obsessively ruminate and worry about the threat, and engage in frantic bids to obtain reassurance from the organization and its representatives. All their energy and efforts are directed towards protecting, guarding, and maintaining their relationship at all costs, in order to recreate their feelings of security. Relationship maintenance is central to the anxious individual because it validates their self (Main et al., 1985).

Fig. 1. The role of attachment — dimensions (anxiety and avoidance) in the threat or loss of the employment relationship.
In contrast, avoidance is developed in individuals when they have had significant figures respond to their bids for closeness and support, in ways that consistently express distance, rejection and anger. Avoidant individuals have been actively discouraged from expressing negative emotional experiences (Main, 1990). As a result, when they become upset or sense threats in their relationships, they employ de-activating strategies that suppress relationship-related distress, and tend to withdraw from the relationship.

Avoidant individuals, particularly those low in anxiety, respond to threat with “compulsive self-reliance” (Bowlby, 1982) and counter-dependent behaviors. These dynamics are likely to occur in the employment relationships as well (Kahn & Kram, 1994). Avoidance may cause individuals to be generally detached from their employing organization and organizational members. Consequently, the threat of employment loss may spontaneously de-activate any sense of connection with the organization, and trigger further distancing from the organization. Therefore, we suggest that during the threat of employment loss, organizational members' internal models of attachment will be motivated and their reactions will be congruent with characteristic attachment behaviors.

**Proposition 1a.** Organizational member’s internal models of attachment are activated during the threat of employment dissolution. Likelihood of activation will be particularly strong among those high in anxiety.

**Proposition 1b.** Anxiety will be positively associated with obsessive dependent behavior (e.g., chronic worry about the loss, constant attempts to guard, protect, and maintain the relationship) in response to perceptions of threat to the employment relationship.

**Proposition 1c.** Avoidance will be positively related with withdrawal behavior (angry detachment, self-isolation, rejection of the organization, etc.) in response to perceptions of threat to the employment relationship.

### 1.3. Fearful individuals: combined effects of anxiety and avoidance

When individuals tend to be both anxious and avoidant, the combined effects of these dimensions are particularly distinct and extreme. As in their inter-personal relationships, these individuals will often be distrustful and suspicious of their organization and its representatives (e.g., Albert & Horowitz, 2009; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Being fearful, they have negative views of themselves as unworthy of responsiveness and attention from others, and possess deep fears of rejection and abandonment (Feeney, 1998).

While the fearful avoidants’ negative view of others causes them to withdraw from and reject relationships, interestingly, their lack of self-regard causes them to strongly desire and long for approval and recognition from others at the same time. Therefore, they are caught in a perpetual internal approach–avoidance conflict (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996; Thomson et al., 2012) in their relationships with peers and organizational representatives. These fluctuating patterns may cause extremely high levels of frustration, despair, checked behaviors and stress-related symptoms. Fearful individuals evaluate threats as non-reversible and non-modifiable (Simpson & Rholes, 2002), and experience a complete loss of control over their circumstances in the face of any threat, particularly the loss of a relationship. Consequently, in the face of employment loss, they will be completely overwhelmed by their sense of inadequacy, and express unpredictable and erratic emotional storms and extreme behavioral patterns (Mancini & Bonanno, 2009).

We suggest that this group of individuals may particularly experience major depressive episodes, extreme hostile aggressiveness, and self-destructive thoughts and behaviors because of their inability to handle such threats.

In contrast, secure attachment (characterized by the presence of lowest levels of both anxiety and avoidance) may respond adaptively to any threats to their employment relationship. They have positive views of themselves, others and their relationships, are not hyper-vigilant of threats, and do not expect abandonment or rejection at every threat. Being comfortable depending on others and having others depend on them, they may find comfort in their supportive network of friends, family and organizational peers, and seek instrumental support from them, which can tackle their threats. Moreover, their beliefs of self-worth and self-efficacy enable them to confront the threatening situation constructively and positively. In the face of threats, they will experience the lowest levels of frustration and stress-related symptoms.

**Proposition 2.** The interactive effects of anxiety and avoidance will predict erratic patterns of behavior (approach–avoidance, major depressive episodes, extreme self-destructive behaviors, etc.) during the threat of employment-dissolution, beyond the main effect of either dimension alone. While those high in both dimensions will show the lowest level of adjustment, those low in both dimensions will demonstrate the highest level of adjustment.

### 1.4. Attachment and cognitive appraisals of dissolution

A central component of recent models of job loss is the construct of cognitive appraisal (Fugate et al., 2012). Cognitive appraisal is the process through which an individual evaluates or determines the significance of an event (i.e., loss) in terms of how it may affect his or her personal well-being. For example, the individual makes primary assessments of the harm or loss associated with the stressful event. Next, the individual makes secondary assessments of what can be done to prevent harm, and improve the prospects for benefit. Both primary and secondary assessments converge to determine whether the event is primarily threatening (holding the possibility of harm or loss), or challenging (holding the possibility of mastery or benefit) (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986).

Internal models of attachment have been demonstrated as influential in shaping one’s evaluations and perceptions of stressful encounters (such as relationship loss) in characteristic ways (Collins & Read, 1990; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). They are associated with cognitive scripts and schemas, which serve to influence perceptions and appraisals of situations. The loss of an employment
relationship is invariably associated with some perceptions of uncertainty and threat. When faced with this uncertainty people often attempt to construct a version of reality through cognitive appraisal, to make sense of this event (Leana & Feldman, 1988; Weick, 1977), and respond as if this “reality” were “objectively” true. Therefore, appraisals are made on 1) the extent of harm or loss and/or 2) the extent of potential challenge (mastery or benefit) associated with the event (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Anxiety predisposes individuals to make threatening interpretations of ambiguous stimuli, and construct appraisals of life’s adversities as more threatening, irreversible, and uncontrollable than they may actually be. In the face of a stressful relationship situation, these individuals tend to exaggerate the potential negative impact of the threat, and become excessively hyper-vigilant of the availability of their relationship in a manner that discourages the development of autonomy and self-confidence (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004). These feelings may be particularly pronounced in the loss of the employment relationship given the fact that so much of the individual’s self-worth hinges on the maintenance of this important relationship. Even if the anxious individual has a high likelihood of re-employment (e.g., due to superior education or experience) (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1986; Latack et al., 1995; Schneer, 1993), he or she will likely construct appraisals of greater loss and harm.

Hazan and Shaver (1990) demonstrated that anxious individuals expected to be undervalued by co-workers and expected lower evaluations from their peers. Being predisposed to negative stimuli, and having extremely low evaluations of themselves, they will be less likely to perceive a sense of challenge, benefit or mastery associated with the situation causing stress.

In contrast, a lack of anxiety creates a more objective analysis of the situation, and an opportunity to see the potential benefits and opportunities associated with the event. Individuals low in anxiety (dismissing and secure individuals) will therefore tend to evaluate events with less anxiety, and their reactions will be more situationally-contingent. However, most job loss situations do involve feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Dismissing individuals, by their tendency to distrust organizational peers and all forms of authority, may be predisposed to be biased and negative in their evaluations of the situation.

On the other hand, secure individuals process information in a more open and flexible manner than insecure persons primarily because their working models do not tend to distort threat-related information (Main, 1991). Therefore, these individuals may be more likely to see the positive aspects and opportunities associated with the loss even while feeling distressed about the loss. They may acknowledge the situation, appraise the situation as favorable, and recognize opportunities for growth and career promotions (Latack & Dozier, 1986) thereby gaining more strength and motivation for satisfactory subsequent re-employment. Even when the event carries substantial loss, they are focused on constructive problem solving, and seeking positive support from others (Kobak & Scerey, 1988).

**Proposition 3a.** Organizational member’s attachment models will influence their cognitive appraisals of the loss of employment relationship. Perceptions of harm and loss will be particularly strong among those high in anxiety, and relatively weak for those low in anxiety.

**Proposition 3b.** Anxiety and avoidance will interact with each other, such that those individuals low in both anxiety and avoidance will perceive the lowest levels of harm/loss associated with the dissolution.

**Proposition 3c.** Perceptions of challenge will be particularly weak among those high in anxiety, and relatively strong for those low in anxiety. Anxiety and avoidance will interact with each other such that those individuals low in both anxiety and avoidance will perceive the highest levels of challenge associated with the dissolution.

1.5. Attachment and coping with the loss of the employment relationship

Most research on coping with job loss involves examination of how individuals respond to multiple aspects of loss associated with the event of employment termination: economic loss, loss of personal identity (Parkes, 1988), and loss of social networks. We expect that attachment factors will influence the selection of coping strategies to deal with these multiple aspects of employment loss (Eckenrode, 1991).

An individual’s cognitive schemata related to early attachment experiences suggest that internal working models not only dictate how individuals respond in future stressful situations but also guide their subsequent emotional adjustment. The base that secure individuals seem to have attained from early experiences seems to be a personal resource that facilitates adaptive adjustment to future stressful situations. These skills and abilities are manifested in optimistic expectations, a strong sense of self-control and self-efficacy, and positive problem-focused strategies for dealing with stressful situations (Collins & Read, 1990). Secure individuals develop strong beliefs on the manageability of life’s adversities and display superior emotional adjustment and coping outcomes in the face of relational and other crises (Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993). Therefore, we expect that secure attachment will be associated with positive problem-focused coping strategies in the threat of the loss of the employment relationship.

In contrast, insecure attachment orientations are associated with problems of emotional adjustment and maladaptive forms of emotion-focused coping (Kobak & Scerey, 1988). Insecure individuals have been shown to have more negative and mistrusting views of the social world and of human nature in general (Collins & Read, 1990). They are more likely to adopt hostile and indirect coping behaviors such as criticizing, yelling, withdrawing, demanding and arguing with others. When encountering a loss, insecure individuals react with strong emotional distress and anger, even after the threat is removed. Both anxiety and avoidance have been associated with negative affect — i.e., shame, fear, anger (Simpson, 1990) in the face of stress, and escape behaviors such as alcohol consumption and eating disorders (Brennan, Shaver, & Tobey, 1991).
The coping literature identifies three major types of coping: regulating stressful emotions (emotion-focused coping), problem-focused coping, and escape—avoidance coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, and DeLongis (1986) demonstrated that subjects accepted more responsibility and used more problem-focused coping when they evaluated the stressful situation as changeable and adapted more emotion-focused and escape—avoidance when they appraised encounters as unchangeable.

It is likely that insecure individuals, who appraise situations negatively, will perceive employment dissolution as a negative, non-changeable and irretrievable event, and respond with emotion-focused coping. While anxiety is significantly associated with emotional expressions of distress such as crying and volatile fighting with relational partners (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001), avoidant individuals are likely to express elevated levels of contempt, aggression and hostility when they perceive external threats and injustice (Albert & Moskowitz, 2014; Kobak & Scerrey, 1988) including those from the organization (as in the case of the loss of employment relationship).

Proposition 4a. Organizational members’ internal models of attachment will influence their coping responses to the loss of the employment relationship. Both anxiety and avoidance will be associated with choices of maladaptive emotion-focused strategies such as distancing, criticizing, yelling and retaliating. Secure attachment (low avoidance and low anxiety) will be most positively associated with problem-focused coping.

Proposition 4b. Cognitive appraisals will partially mediate the relationship between attachment dimensions and coping responses. Perceptions of challenge will mediate the positive relationship between secure attachment and problem-focused coping responses. Perceptions of threat (harm and/or loss) will mediate the positive relationship between insecure attachment (specifically anxiety) and the choice of maladaptive emotion-focused strategies.

1.6. Attachment and the seeking of social support during employment loss

Generally, attachment-related differences expressed in measures of support seeking are pronounced during anxiety-provoking situations involving threat, loss or harm (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that secure individuals were comfortable with intimacy, closeness and social support, and their relationships were characterized by the presence of trust and mutual support. Therefore, they are more likely to seek and receive emotional and instrumental support from others during a stressful situation (Collins & Read, 1990; Kobak & Scerrey, 1988). However, they do not excessively or exclusively rely on social support for coping with stress. They maintain healthy and balanced levels of support and autonomy simultaneously. In a study on how individuals reacted to the traumatic event of Scud missile attacks on their city, Mikulincer et al. (1993) found that secure individuals sought more support than insecure individuals, even as they prioritized their autonomy and utilized their independent problem-solving capabilities.

In contrast, both anxiety and avoidance tend to be positively associated with discomfort with social relationships, and more hostility to others in the face of stress (Kobak & Scerrey, 1988; Mikulincer et al., 1993). When a relationship is threatened, anxiety triggers a deep-seated and insatiable desire for intimacy, often leading to excessive demands for reassurance and support from the partner. If any lack of availability is perceived, they demonstrate intense pangs of anger, jealousy, manipulation and hostile aggression (Simpson et al., 1996).

Avoidant individuals, on the other hand, have difficulty trusting others and depending on others. In work contexts, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007a, 2007b) showed that avoidant individuals had lower levels of organizational commitment and prosocial behaviors. Geller and Bamberger (2009) found that these individuals provide help to others in a minimalist manner, and restricted personal involvement with others. Therefore, avoidant individuals are less likely to have a supportive network of co-workers and friends at work. Additionally, they are also less likely to seek any support from others outside the organization, in the face of employment loss.

Proposition 5. Anxiety will be related positively and avoidance negatively with seeking of social support (both emotional and instrumental) in the event of the loss of the employment relationship.

1.7. Grief and resolution oscillations

According to Parkes (1971), when an employment relationship is terminated, the individual may experience a deep sense of irretrievable loss—characterized by emotional distress and psychological trauma similar to what they experience during the loss of a loved one (Jones, 1979; Stybel, 1981). Interviews with people who have lost their jobs confirm the grief-like process of the loss (Archer & Rhodes, 1993; Hayes & Nutman, 1981; Hill, 1978). The resolution of these feelings is central to one’s emotional and psychological well-being, and the accomplishment of satisfactory recovery and re-employment.

Bowlby’s (1980) research on attachment and loss of relationships discusses “separation distress” (the urge to cry and search for the lost person). Interestingly, Parkes (1971) suggests that employees do express a similar preoccupation with job loss, and experience an
urge to search for what was lost. Just as a person grieving the loss of a loved one sometimes dreams (about the lost one), fantasizes (about the person), denies (that the individual no longer is with them), and suffers deep pangs of missing the lost loved one, the loss of an employment relationship may be accompanied by grief-related behaviors such as missing the relationship, wishful thinking (e.g., about still being with the organization), and denial (that the relationship doesn’t exist anymore).

Dealing with a loss of a relationship is distinct from and more complicated than dealing with a stressful situation that does not involve a relationship loss. Just as people experiencing a break-up (or bereavement) need to accept the loss of their loved ones and adapt to a world without them, employees need to accept their loss and adapt to a world without that relationship. Often, this loss of relationship is a permanent change which cannot be altered or undone (Wortman & Silver, 1989). Drawing from theory and research on grief, we suggest that the process of coming to terms with the loss involves “working through the loss” (e.g., Bowlby, 1980; Worden, 2008), and “separating from” the relationship. Accordingly, we postulate that the person has to deal with two types of specific stressors simultaneously: dissolution-oriented and resolution-oriented stressors.

The dissolution–orientation incorporates a focus on the “dissolution experience” or aspects of the loss — such as yearning, rumination, separation distress, and reappraisal of the meaning of the loss. Alternatively, resolution-oriented stressors consist of dealing with the indirect consequences and situational changes of the relationship loss, such as loss of income, loss of social networks, and changing of status from employed to unemployed.

These two orientations are distinct from the categories of emotion- and problem-focused coping discussed earlier (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Some stressors in the dissolution-oriented and resolution-oriented domains can be dealt with in both an emotion-focused way and a problem-focused way. For example, a person in the dissolution–orientation phase may experience sadness and grief (emotion-focused) and make efforts to re-establish some connection with the organization (in the form of alumni connections or buying the organization’s product). On the other hand, a person may deal with the loss of income (resolution–orientation) either in an emotion-focused way (with anxiety and anger) or in a problem-focused way (e.g., by searching for re-employment or requesting a personal loan).

Using this model, we postulate that both orientations are necessary for effective healing. It has been postulated that individuals do not simultaneously focus on a ‘dissolution’–orientation and a ‘resolution’–orientation at the same time, at any point in the coping process, but instead ‘oscillate’ between each orientation. An oscillation between the two types of orientations is an indication of adaptively “working through one’s loss” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). We suggest that attachment theory can be also used as a paradigm for understanding the grief and patterns of oscillation in the loss of the employment relationship.

Secure individuals enjoy their work, expect positive evaluations from co-workers, and form healthy work relationships characterized by the presence of trust, interdependence and autonomy (i.e., Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Kahn & Kram, 1994). When they experience a loss of relationship, they react emotionally to the loss, but are not overwhelmed by their affective reactions. Drawing from existing theory and research, we expect that secure individuals will respond to their loss with moderate levels of sadness and anxiety. They attend to their loss-related emotions, discuss them coherently, and express them constructively. Invariably, they “let go” and move on by recovering from their emotional strain since they have greater mental and behavioral flexibility than insecure individuals. Consequently, they engage in healthy restorative activity in a flexible and balanced way, and positively adjust to the loss (Solomon & George, 1999).

Therefore, their loss reactions will oscillate flexibly between a dissolution focus (acknowledging, appraising and experiencing the loss), and a resolution focus (getting on with life activities, searching for re-employment, seeking instrumental help, learning new skills, etc.).

Proposition 6a. The interactive effects of anxiety and avoidance will predict the highest levels of adjustment to the grief of employment loss beyond the main effect of either dimension alone. While secure attachment will be associated with the expression of moderate levels of emotion (being upset, sad, anxious, etc.), they will not be overwhelmed by grief reactions, and will experience the highest levels of behavioral flexibility.

In contrast, insecure individuals (both anxious and avoidant) will experience extreme levels of dwelling within one of the two dimensions. In any relationship loss, anxiety is associated with an obsessive focus on the dissolution. In organizational contexts, anxious individuals have been shown to depend and rely heavily on the praise and approval of organizational representatives because their self-esteem hinges on their evaluations (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). In the event of involuntary employment loss, they will tend to cling more with the organization, trying to plead, manipulate and re-bond with it. These individuals may experience chronic grieving, excessive negative emotions, and an unrelenting, exclusive preoccupation with the rejecting relationship. Such is their despair that they will be unable to perceive a life beyond their sphere of dependence on and obsession with their relationship (Kahn & Kram, 1994). Being overwhelmed by the loss of their “presumptive world”, these individuals will lack the self-control and regulatory capabilities to get on with life. They will tend to be stuck in a dissolution–orientation with very little levels of resolution–orientation.

Alternatively, avoidance will be associated with a tendency to suppress and avoid expressions of emotions. They show little or no signs of grieving and will remain stuck in a resolution-focus (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). These individuals have been actively discouraged from expressing distress in their early relationships, and lack the ability to acknowledge and retrieve their emotional memories (Main, 1990). As a result, when they become upset, they do not display signs of distress. At work, these individuals are detached from their peers and do not seek nor give social support to others. They are counter-dependent, and defiant of authority structures (Kahn & Kram, 1994). Consequently, these individuals restrict their expressions of distress, and focus on resolution activities.

Proposition 6b. Anxiety will be positively associated with the dissolution orientation, and low levels of oscillation between the dissolution and resolution orientation.
Proposition 6c. Avoidance will be positively associated with the resolution orientation, and low levels of oscillation between the dissolution and resolution orientation.

Of particular interest in this context is the fearful individual, who is often referred to as the “disorganized” individual, often theorized as highly troubled when facing loss (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999; Thomson et al., 2012). These individuals have been traumatized in ways that have damaged their ability to think clearly about attachment-related issues, and express emotions reasonably and coherently. Therefore, they show the highest levels of unresolved grief during loss, and experience extreme and painful oscillations between dissolution and resolution orientations.

During a relationship loss, they experience injury of their self-image, compulsively re-experience feelings associated with traumatic stressors and internalize the loss of benefits and resources associated with the loss. Being fearful, they feel extreme levels of inadequacy, and lack the abilities required to envision a life without the relationship. For them, the loss of a relationship will be closely linked with feelings of “death” and “dying” for a long time (Kubler, 1969). Therefore, we expect that fearful attachment will be associated with the highest levels of maladjustment to the loss accompanied by disorganized levels of dissolution and resolution orientations.

Proposition 6d. The interactive effects of anxiety and avoidance will predict disorganized and maladjusted oscillations between dissolution orientation and resolution orientation, above and beyond the main effects of each one of the dimensions. Fearful individuals will display significantly high levels of disorganized oscillations.

I.8. Emotional and retaliatory responses to the loss of employment relationships

Research has confirmed that the frequency and intensity of emotions experienced in relationships serve as a good barometer of how close individuals feel towards their relational partners (Barrett, Robin, Pietromonaco, & Eyssel, 1998). This can be said to be true of employees’ bonds with their employing organizations too (e.g. Maertz & Campion, 2004). Experiencing strong and frequent emotions within a relationship communicates that one truly cares about the relationship (Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001). These bonds are negatively related to intentions to quit and antisocial work behaviors (Greenberg, 1997), and positively associated with commitment to the organization (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

Interestingly, the attachment lens reveals that not all types of emotionally strong bonds necessarily have positive implications for the organization. Attachment theory, being one that helps identify the triggers and contexts that typically elicit specific kinds of retaliatory behaviors commonly experienced in relationship dissolution, actually demonstrates that “strong” relationships may hurt the organization than “weak” ties (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Surprisingly very little research has investigated these impacts on organizations. Given the findings on organizational retaliation (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), this is a very important area of investigation.

Very few studies have examined individual responses to lay-offs. One note-worthy exception is the study by Astrachan (1990), which demonstrated the different ways that individuals responded to employment loss. While some became hostile and aggressive, others became increasingly non-productive, while still others seemed to be inviting burn-out as they threw themselves into work with greater zeal than ever. Yet no research has examined the psychological mechanisms that may possibly determine these reactions.

During an employment loss, employees express a variety of emotions such as anger, shock, hostility, shame and guilt. These feelings are often described cumulatively as a “hot and burning” sensation (Bies & Tripp, 2002). While some individuals will likely respond with extreme emotional and behavioral reactivity (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), some others take it in stride, and some perhaps even respond positively. A significant amount of the variation in these reactions may be reproductions of patterns of early behavior, and expressed unconsciously, appearing to be incomprehensible from a rational decisional framework (Kahn & Kram, 1994).

Relationship research reveals that secure individuals respond more constructively than insecure individuals to unjust or negative treatment from others (Zimmermann, Maier, Winter, & Grossmann, 2001). During a loss, they are more reflective and less impulsive, positively appraise their loss, and use their anger constructively. They tend to take on a more problem-solving focus, and engage in ways to heal, maintain and enhance their relationships (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), adjust better and search for favorable reemployment. Consequently, they will also be less likely to retaliate against the organization with counterproductive work behaviors and hostile aggression. Instead, they will use their anger to right wrongs, prevent future injustice and create positive change.

In contrast, we expect insecurity to be associated with higher levels of negative emotional reactivity and behavioral retaliation towards the organization (in the event of relationship loss). Avoidance is associated with quarrelsomelessness, dysfunctional anger, blame, and open hostility (Albert & Moskowitz, 2014; Rhodes, Simpson, & Orih, 1999). Anxiety, being associated with strong emotional dependence and ties with the organization, will be related to intrusive tangential memories and ruminations about the relationship. These individuals may also display bouts of dysfunctional anger, aggression and retaliation towards the rejecting organization.

Fearful individuals, because of their sense of irreversible loss (Thomson et al., 2012), and deep fears about seeking reemployment will display the highest levels of anti-organizational aggression and retaliation. These individuals may excessively obsess with thoughts of hurting the organization, and actually give-in to these temptations, and act on their impulses by angry and aggressive retaliation.

Proposition 7a. Attachment models will impact an individual’s emotional reactivity and retaliatory behaviors towards the organization, in the event of a relationship loss. This relationship will be mediated by the employees’ affective states.

Proposition 7b. Both avoidance and anxiety will be associated with dysfunctional anger and retaliatory outcomes.
Proposition 7c. The interactive effects of anxiety and avoidance will predict the highest levels of negative affect and retaliatory behavior beyond the main effect of either dimension alone. Those high in both anxiety and avoidance will show the highest levels of retaliatory behaviors, and those lowest in both dimensions will show lowest levels of retaliation.

1.9. Detachment, reorganization and reintegration

When one experiences a loss, no matter how hard it is, one has to go on with life. Gradually one “separates” from the relationship, and stays longer within the resolution–orientation. Attachment theory suggests that individuals do indeed learn to develop strategies to carry on with their lives, once a loss happens. Secure attachment is associated with a positive and constructive reflection on the relationship, making sense of the transition, forgiveness of any perceived transgressions and re-evaluation of life ahead (e.g., a career opportunities). During any relationship loss, forgiveness plays an important role in the resolution process (Hargrave, 1994). This enables secure individuals to frame the event positively, perhaps even perceive the loss as a blessing in disguise (Latack & Dozier, 1986; Zikic & Klehe, 2006), and have greater satisfaction and success in gaining reemployment (Defrank & Ivancevich, 1986). This encourages a likelihood of continuing some degree of positive relationship with the organization with which the loss was experienced (perhaps through alumni connections or consulting networks).

However, insecure attachment is more likely to be associated with a lack of forgiveness, and continued retaliatory behavior after the “loss” (Sullivan, Forret, & Mainiero, 2007). Avoidance will be associated with continued hostility and “distancing” from the organization. Anxiety, on the other hand may involve an obsessive focus on the loss, even if successful and satisfactory reemployment occurs.

Proposition 8. Both anxiety and avoidance will be related to a lack of forgiveness of the “loss”, and lingering unresolved feelings of anger and hostility. Secure individuals will experience the highest levels of forgiveness and reconciliation towards the organization.

2. Discussion

The current discussion reveals the usefulness of attachment theory in understanding and explaining the impact of job loss on individuals. Specifically, it highlights that the ways in which individuals think, feel and behave in employment loss, may be governed not only by causal factors and variables in their immediate environment, but also by the nature and course of their developmental histories. The theory discussed provides a new perspective on the employee–organization relationship, and highlights how relevant life-history information of an employee can be used to understand distress, anger, frustration and behavioral retaliation in the loss of the employment relationship. Further, it opens up a whole new perspective integrating research on relationships and job loss, suggesting a possibility that one’s psychological bonding with the employing organization is perceived as an important and self-defining relationship by the individual. By utilizing an attachment theory perspective, we illustrate the possibility that when employees perceive “strong” ties with the organization, it is not always a good thing. Insecure individuals who are deeply attached with their organizations often exhibit negative emotional reactions and retaliatory behavioral tendencies when their employment relationship is threatened just as they would in a central interpersonal relationship.

2.1. Implications for management research and practice

We expect this research to contribute to management theory in several ways. First, the way in which scholars approach the involuntary loss of employment (e.g., downsizing, layoffs, and restructuring) would benefit from incorporating individuals’ developmental histories. Given that these histories are inextricably linked to future cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies, it may be possible to explain employee reactions to change above and beyond variance accounted for by the Big Five personality traits and situational factors. It is perhaps less convenient to address employee attachment styles, provided that they are less tractable. However, it is possible that they can help us explain why individuals facing the same situation (e.g., incipient job loss) may appraise it entirely different from one another. One person may see it as a challenge whereas another may see it as a threat simply because the former is low on anxiety and avoidance. A better understanding of how attachment styles affect these appraisals can lead to improved outcomes for the individual and his or her employer through tailored interventions and change management policies.

Second, workplace retaliation and violence is an increasingly vital topic in the management literature. While the relationship between attachment styles and violence within intimate personal relationships has been established (e.g., Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman, & Yerinton, 2000; Senchak & Leonard, 1992), scholarship on attachment styles and workplace violence remains absent. In fact, LeBlanc and Kelloway’s (2002) instrument for measuring the risk of workplace violence has been well received, yet it fails to consider attachment styles or other forms of psychological connectedness. Instead, it relies on characteristics of the job such as whether someone handles guns, works evenings, or dispenses drugs. Incorporating attachment styles into a measure of workplace violence may lead to improved psychometric properties and a tool that is less reliant on job characteristics that may change over time.

Third, the way in which employers handle job termination can have a marked effect on the coping responses of employees. For instance, employee coping strategies are heavily dependent upon appraisals of threat. Therefore, when dealing with employees who are high in anxiety and avoidance, it may be important for employers and management professionals to be understanding of the attachment-related implications of employment-loss, and handle this as not just as a professional-issue, but as one that may evoke deep grief and a sense of being abandoned. This may lead to a better understanding of how and when different management
interventions might be used to abate negative reactions (e.g., chronic blame, reputational damage, retaliatory aggression) to threatening situations.

Last, management of low performers has received significant attention in management scholarship. However, it is possible that certain employees are low performers simply because management fails to understand their attachment styles and more generally the best way to approach relationships with these individuals. For example, an employee high in avoidance may be quick to dismiss the relationship and therefore needs to be handled with more care than someone with a more secure orientation. On the other hand, individuals high in anxiety will tend to expect the worst, therefore any surprises (good or bad), may be perceived as a threat. Therefore these employees may need clear and concise information about any threatening events, including their potential to cause the individual harm.

This research suggests that strong emotional bonds are not always necessarily good for the organization. Contrary to prior research that extols the benefits of psychological attachment with the organization, this work demonstrates the greater likelihood of retaliation and negative affect for those who have strong emotional bonds with the organization. An important implication is for managers to understand the effects of insecure attachment on organizational relationships, and help manage these relationships, such that employees do not become excessively and negatively dependent or “obsessed” with their organization. A good way to prevent such an occurrence may perhaps be to familiarize individuals with other career opportunities, and provide them the opportunities to discover other interests and relationships, thereby allowing a healthy disengagement from the organization before loss.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, our research suggests that the sense of loss that occurs as a consequence of employment dissolution is strikingly similar to feelings of grief and abandonment associated with the loss of a critical relationship in one’s life. Managers and organizational representatives making such decisions need to be aware of these effects, and proactively plan to put interventions in place to respond to these feelings. Getting individuals to understand how valued they are, enabling them to experience relational support, love and compassion may be helpful as an attachment intervention in this process (Chugh, Kern, Zhu, & Lee, 2014). We suggest that these interventions may be helpful to prevent retaliation and negative affect towards the organization. While this is not to say that an individual’s past unalterably determines the future course of their behavior in work or other contexts, we provide evidence of how theory and empirical analysis shed light on how attachment-related experiences may be useful in explaining why individuals react the way they do to an employment relationship loss.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Lynn Shore, Ken Locke, David Day and Ray Hogler for their constructive suggestions. Jenny Reed and Joshua Bennett provided assistance for this research.

References


