Organizational Attachment: Exploring the Psychodynamics of the Employment Relationship

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Abstract

This paper outlines a theoretical framework that may be useful for understanding how and why employees become psychologically attached to the organizations that employ them, in spite of growing evidence that many of these organizations are not reliable sources of security. Building on attachment theory from developmental psychology, I develop the concept of organizational attachment and distinguish between it and concepts of organizational commitment and organizational identification. Attachment theory suggests that individuals have attachment styles that reflect their beliefs and expectations about themselves in relation to the broader social system. I extend this theory and apply it to relationships between individuals and the organizations for which they work. Thus, I posit that individuals have “organizational attachment styles” that can be used to predict how employees will perceive and respond to situations that may threaten their relationship to their employing organization. This theoretical framework may be helpful in identifying the characteristics of future employment relationships that can meet individuals’ needs to be psychologically attached to their organizations and, at the same time, provide the flexibility that organizations need to be competitive.

Descriptors: organizational attachment, employment relationships, commitment, organizational identity, psychodynamics of organizations

180 words
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Organizations today are struggling to create new forms of employment relationships that allow them the flexibility to keep costs down (e.g., easy elimination of personnel, unilateral job redesign). At the same time, organizations are seeking ever greater commitment from their employees to keep productivity and innovation high (Pfeffer and Baron, 1988). Even a casual perusal of headlines in the business press suggests that these apparently contradictory efforts have been far from successful. Companies still proclaim that their costs are too high in light of fierce global competition; layoff survivors as well as victims often complain that they have lost faith in their companies’ (or former companies’) top managers. In spite of the reality of employment uncertainty and the rhetoric of employee disaffection, however, many individuals still identify strongly with their employing organization (Rousseau, 1998). This paper explores a potential explanation for this relatively high degree of identification. By emphasizing the interaction between individual differences and situational factors, the attachment perspective taken in this paper provides insight into the complex nature of employment relationships. As a result, it may facilitate the development of future employment relationships that can accommodate organizational flexibility as well as employee commitment, identification, and attachment.

One serious impediment to effectively meeting the apparently competing goals of organizational flexibility and employee commitment is the lack of a clear understanding of the psychology of the employment relationship. Without understanding more about what employment relationships means to individuals, it is virtually impossible to devise employment relationships that are both flexible from the perspective of the company and worth committing to from the perspective of the employee. To address this critical issue,
this paper follows the lead of other organizational researchers in taking a psychodynamic approach to studying organizations (see, for example, Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Hirschhorn, 1988, 1990; Diamond, 1993a, 1993b; Vince & Broussine, 1996).

In particular, this paper builds upon attachment theory from developmental psychology to understand in more depth the psychology of the employment relationship. The concept of psychological attachment developed in this paper provides a psychological explanation grounded in an evolutionary design that enhances our ability to understand employees' often ambivalent and conflicting feelings about their employment relationships. The breadth of the concept of attachment as a relationship, rather than an attitude, moves us to think in terms of process (how is the attachment relationship enacted and interpreted over time) rather than in terms of variance (how committed is the employee under a given set of static circumstances).

Plan of the Paper. To help ground the discussion that follows, I begin with a brief overview of attachment theory. I then distinguish between the concept of attachment as it is used in the psychology literature and the concepts of organizational commitment and identity as they have been used in the organizational studies literature. I also clarify how the framework proposed here differs from other researchers' application of attachment theory to organizational studies. Then I develop the extensions necessary for applying attachment theory to relationships between individuals and organizations. After presenting general propositions that follow from the theory, I conclude with a discussion of how this perspective adds to our current understanding of the employment relationship and some implications for practice. In particular, I discuss how this framework may help us develop different forms of employment relationships that meet the needs of individuals to be psychologically attached to their employing organization and at the same time
provide the flexibility that organizations need to be competitive in the global business environment.

**HISTORICAL ROOTS: ATTACHMENT THEORY**

My theoretical approach draws upon a theory of psychological attachment (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982). Originally developed to explain infant-mother relationships, attachment theory proposes that felt security is the goal of a behavioral system that supports attachment. A behavioral system refers to the set of interrelated actions that lead to achieving a specific goal. In the case of the attachment system, this includes monitoring experienced levels of security, comparing them to desired levels, and acting to obtain the desired level of security. For example, early in life the attachment system motivates the infant to: (1) look for signs that indicate whether an attachment figure will be available and reliable when needed; (2) monitor the environment for situations in which proximity to the attachment figure would be desirable or necessary; and (3) behave in ways that attempt to enhance feelings of security by maintaining or regaining proximity to the attachment figure. The infant’s actions do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in a context in which the attachment figure may either respond or fail to respond to the infant’s attempts to obtain proximity to and comfort from the attachment figure. Over time, patterns of interactions between the infant and the attachment figure become ingrained and are reproduced in relationships with the attachment figure and in subsequent relationships.

**Attachment Styles**

Researchers have identified some basic patterns of attachment behavior in studies of infants (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In some cases infants participate in patterns of interaction that lead them to feel confident that their attachment figures will be
available and responsive when needed, providing the desired level of comfort and proximity for these infants. Consequently, these infants (labeled “Secure”) develop a pattern of interaction that is characterized by seeking proximity when exposed to some stressor in the environment or when feeling tired or ill. In other cases an infant is unable to rely on the attachment figure due to past failures by the attachment figure to respond appropriately to attempts to obtain comfort and proximity. In these cases, attachment theory suggests that when a feeling of security is lacking and cannot be attained due to distrust of the attachment figure, these infants (labeled “Avoidant”) are likely to distance themselves (either physically, psychologically, or both) from their attachment figures. A third pattern of attachment behaviors results when an infant is uncertain about whether the attachment figure can be relied upon. In these cases, inconsistent responses from prior attachment figures lead these infants (labeled “Ambivalent”) to engage in inconsistent patterns of behavior, sometimes withdrawing and sometimes striving to maintain the attachment.

**Evolution of the Attachment System**

Although early infant attachment behaviors are driven by an instinctive process, as a child grows older, these behaviors and the attachment relationships that they are designed to foster take on an additional dimension. The attached person begins to experience a “psychological bond to the attachment figure who plays the part of secure base and haven.” (Bretherton & Waters, 1985: 7; see also Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby (1982) argues that the attachment system operates throughout an individual’s life. However, in contrast to physical proximity, which is central to infant attachment, psychological closeness increases in importance as individuals’ cognitive structures become more complex. The development of more advanced cognitive capabilities, especially memory functions and reasoning abilities, facilitates this shift. For example, a child who can generate explanations for departure of mother and believes that she will return has the necessary
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foundation for replacing of physical proximity with psychological closeness. Such a child can still feel secure in the knowledge that mother is available, even though she may not be physically present.

**Attachment in Late Adolescence and Adulthood**

The impact of parental attachment does not end in childhood. Kenny (1994: 399) notes that research on late adolescents (approximately 18 to 22 years of age) supports the idea that “secure parental attachment is associated with social competence, psychological well-being, career maturity, and identity development . . .” Drawing on an attachment theory perspective, Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell (1994) linked perceived parental social support to undergraduate academic achievement. Mikulincer, Florian, and Weller (1993) found relationships between individuals’ attachment styles and the coping strategies they engaged in and the level of stress they experienced in a study of students living in areas targeted by most of the Iraqi Scud missile attacks during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Research has also suggested links between individuals’ “mental models” of their relationships with their parents and the development of personality disorders in adulthood (Patrick, Hobson, Castle, Howard, & Maughan, 1994) as well as to parenting styles and symptoms of depression (Pearson, Cohn, Cowan, & Cowan, 1994).

In addition to influencing outcomes such as social competence and coping behaviors, attachment styles often influence the types of relationship that individuals enter into. Individuals actively (although often unconsciously) work to reproduce the types of relationships that they have experienced in the past (Bowlby 1973). For example, studies of abusive parents suggest that these individuals were frequently abused themselves as children. Although it may seem that abused children would be the least likely to abuse their own children, the fact that they do supports the idea that they are trapped in a pattern
of reproducing the type of parenting relationship that they internalized as children (De Lozier, 1982). Similarly, people are frequently drawn toward the same types of romantic relationships that they have experienced in the past (Parkes & Stevenson-Hinde 1982). Research on romantic attachment suggests that the attachment styles reported for infants are also appropriate for categorizing adult attachment relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1990; Simpson, 1990). There is also evidence that in a significant proportion of cases, styles developed in childhood carry over into adulthood (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Furthermore, there is evidence that different attachment styles are linked to differences in feelings of relationship commitment and satisfaction and in behavior. For example, research suggests that individuals with avoidant attachment styles will have less success in their romantic relationships than individuals with secure styles (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

**Stability of Attachment Styles.** Research on relationships across the life course has shown some support for consistency between early attachment relationships and later social behavior (Skolnick, 1986; see also Clausen, 1993). This is not to suggest that attachment styles are completely invariant. Researchers have debated the consistency of dispositions over time and situations extensively in the literature and it would be unreasonable to propose that attachment styles can never change. Indeed, Bowlby (1973) suggests that the level of anxiety experienced in relationships with attachment figures can be affected by events throughout childhood. However, we do have evidence to suggest that once attachment styles are established they are relatively stable. They are typically only altered with repeated or very salient experiences where individuals' mental models have failed to provide accurate predictions or as a result of intensive therapy focused on changing those mental models.
In sum, the evidence from developmental psychology suggests that individuals develop different attachment styles that reflect their experiences in early attachment relationships. These attachment styles are relatively stable and have an impact on behavior later in life such as parenting styles and coping strategies.

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The fundamental concepts of attachment theory can be extended to develop a theory of attachment to organizations. In the discussion that follows, I conceptualize organizational attachment as an analog of personal attachment with the organization, rather than another person, substituted as the attachment figure. That is, just as individuals develop enduring affective bonds to their primary caregivers and later to romantic partners, they may also develop enduring affective bonds to the organizations for which they work. As a result of these bonds, individuals are posited to perceive and behave in ways that repeat earlier learned patterns of behavior.

In this section I begin by distinguishing the concept of psychological attachment from organizational commitment and organizational identification. I also distinguish my perspective on attachment from how other organizational researchers have used the theory. Then I develop the necessary extensions to the theory and suggest that when individuals’ employment security may be threatened, their “organizational attachment styles” affect their feelings and perceptions, leading them to attempt to reduce the threat by behaving in ways that they unconsciously believe will maintain the existing relationship. This paper focuses on threats to employment security, which theory suggests are the most potent stimuli for the attachment system. Other stressful events (e.g., receiving an IRS tax deficiency notice) could theoretically activate the organizational attachment system, but the discussion of such alternatives is beyond the scope of this paper. The impact of attachment styles on behavior when there is no threat
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is subject to debate. In the developmental psychology literature, some scholars have argued that attachment styles affect behavior only under conditions of threat; others have argued that behavior may be affected without threat.

The Concept of Psychological Attachment

The concepts of attachment styles and attachment as used in this paper differ in key ways from related concepts of commitment and organizational identification that have been developed in organizational research. Existing research on the employment relationship has shown that individuals are bound to the organizations that employ them by a variety of factors (e.g., economic, social, normative). Much of this research has been driven by a desire to understand commitment to organizations (e.g., O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Randall, Fedor, & Longenecker, 1990) and employee turnover (e.g., Kline & Peters, 1991; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). As a result, attention has been focused on identifying antecedents and outcomes, rather than on developing a unified psychological theory of organizational attachment (e.g., for commitment see Reichers, 1985; for identification see Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Commitment. While commitment can be thought of as an affective state, or temporary attitude, attachment styles are more properly viewed as traits, or relatively permanent aspects of an individual’s personality. Thus, attachment styles should be considered as potentially important predictors of commitment attitudes. Attachment is a psychological and emotional bond that exists between an individual and another entity (in this paper an organization). Although commitment researchers have used the language of “psychological bond,” commitment typically refers to an attitude and has not been scrupulously linked to the organization itself, but rather to economic benefits, sets of corporate values, or even co-workers. In contrast, I focus on the organization as an entity,
rather than on these other elements of organization which, although important, are outside the scope of this paper.

**Identification.** Although commitment and identification are often confused, Mael and Tetrick (1992) found empirical support for distinct concepts of organizational commitment and organizational identification. In contrast to organizational commitment, Ashforth and Mael (1989: 21) define organizational identification as “a perceptual cognitive construct that is not necessarily associated with any specific behaviors or affective states.” In contrast, the concept of organizational attachment has specific implications for behavior. As with commitment, it is also likely that organizational attachment styles would be important predictors of levels of organizational identification.

In organizational attachment relationships, individuals are strongly disposed to perpetuate the psychological and emotional bonds that exist between themselves and the organization. As used here, the construct of attachment only differs from the construct as it is used in developmental psychology in terms of the target of the attachment. In developmental psychology the target is typically a mother-figure or the romantic partner; here the target is the organization. Consistent with developmental psychology, I use attachment style to refer to a general pattern of behaviors, typically outside of conscious awareness, that reflects an underlying mental model of the individual in relation to the attachment figure. This contrasts with the less rigorous use of the term “attachment” as it has been used in writing about commitment and identification.

**Attachment Inside the Organization: Interpersonal Relationships at Work**

Recently, some organizational researchers have begun to link attachment theory from developmental psychology to organizational issues. The most straightforward application of attachment theory in the organizational studies literature has been to interpersonal
relationships within the organization. For example, Nelson, J. C. Quick, and their colleagues have looked at the role that attachment to individuals at work plays in helping to improve the functioning of organizational members. In particular, they consider the effects of attachment theory in the process of newcomer adjustments to the organization (Nelson & Quick, 1991; Nelson, Quick, & Joplin, 1991) and the benefits of attachments for reducing the degree of stress experienced by executives (Quick, Nelson, & Quick, 1987). Work by Kahn and Kram (1994) suggests that an individual’s relationship with authority figures at work also can be linked to their prior experiences. They argue that “individuals are internally motivated to repeatedly develop certain types of authority relations that enable them to use or react to power in ways that are comfortable or necessary for them, for whatever conscious or unconscious reasons” (p. 22; see also Kahn, 1995).

This research has added greatly to our understanding of relationships at work. This paper complements that work by considering the relationship between the individual and the organization as a whole, rather than on the relationships between individuals within the organization. Just as perceived organizational support can be distinguished from perceived supervisor support (Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988 cited in Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997), it is reasonable to expect that employees may distinguish between the organization as a whole and the interpersonal relationships they have within that organization. There is no necessary inconsistency between these two perspectives; they merely take as their focus different types of relationships.

Attachment Outside the Organization: Exploration at Work

In contrast to researchers who have used attachment theory to understand interpersonal relationships at work, a second stream of research has focused more on individuals’ behavior at work and how that behavior is influenced by their interpersonal
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(typically romantic) attachments outside of work. For example, Blustein, Prezioso, and Schultheiss (1995) focus on the relationship between interpersonal attachment styles and career development; Hardy and Barkham (1994) studied the relationship between interpersonal attachment styles and work difficulties. This second perspective is based upon the seminal work of Hazan and Shaver (1990: 270) who argued that for adults, work is similar to "exploration" in Bowlby’s original formulation of attachment theory. They suggest that adult interpersonal attachments provide the necessary security to make it possible for individuals to confidently "play and explore" at work. As described below, I take an alternative view of the role of work in the lives of individuals.

Attachment To the Organization: When Work Becomes Home

In contrast to the view that home is for attachment and work is for exploration proposed by Hazan and Shaver (1990), I suggest that, at least in some cases, individuals’ relationships with their employing organizations are more consistent with the attachment system than the exploration system. This idea, which is developed more fully later in the paper, is consistent with sociological research conducted by Hochschild (1997). In her recent book The Time Bind (provocatively subtitled: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work), Arlie Hochschild describes a reversal in the traditional perception of home and family as the "safe haven" and work as the "heartless world" (p. 202). Her research suggests that, at least for some people, the stresses and uncertainties of home life no longer provide longed for security and acceptance. Rather, it is at work where these individuals find a reliable and orderly haven of security and acceptance. Such a perspective suggests that if attachment theory can be appropriately extended to the employee-organization relationship, it may be able to provide critical insights into the psychology of the employment relationship.
Extending Attachment Theory to Relationships between Individuals and Organizations

There is little debate that individuals bring with them to the organization a load of psychological baggage that they have accumulated across their life course. Psychological themes such as attachment, separation, anxiety, and loss typically are linked to interpersonal relationships in the organization, especially authority relationships (Bernstein, 1985). It has been argued, for example, that anxiety may lead to regression to earlier learned modes of interaction (Diamond, 1993b; Kahn & Kram, 1994). The argument I wish to make here is that in some cases, the organization as an entity takes on the role of a primary attachment or authority figure in the eyes of the employee. One important aspect of this relationship is clearly economic, but other aspects such as identity and recognition are also critical. Even in times of downsizing and corporate restructuring, economic security is typically enhanced by belonging to an organization. Identity, however, may be an even more potent element of the relationship because without identity, the individual ceases to exist. While individuals do have other important identities that they can maintain if their organizational relationship is severed, there is little doubt that for many people organizational identities are highly valued.

The transformation in the eyes of the employee of the organization from an abstract entity with no real existence to an accepted embodiment as a member in a relationship is also helped along by subtle actions on the part of most or all organizational members. There is frequently a concerted effort to get employees to identify with and commit to “the organization.” Anthropomorphising is rampant. Individuals attribute unpleasant actions to “the organization” to mitigate any personal responsibility or guilt they might feel if they were to treat those actions as independently motivated. Thus, in a variety of subtle ways, individuals are made to feel as though organizations not only exist but are
party to a relationship with them in which the organization wields significantly more power (both to reward and to punish) than the individual.

Moving from Attachments to People to Attachments to Abstractions. The transition from interpersonal relationships to relationships between individuals and organizations is directly related to the shift from physical proximity to psychological closeness discussed earlier. Once this shift has been made, the focus of the individual’s attachment behavior in effect may become an image of a primary authority figure and provider, rather than a concrete object, although often some concrete object is associated with that image. Just as an image of mother may comfort a child suffering from poison ivy at summer camp, the image of a job with a dependable organization may greatly comfort an employee with mounting bills and children to put through college.

Thus, with the development of a psychological means of establishing a secure base, the individual can begin to develop relationships with non-human entities such as organizations and institutions. As noted above, such “personification of the organization as ‘we’” (Rousseau, 1998: 210) may be driven in part by conscious attempts to create a sense of identification with the organization. The idea that employees experience themselves as being in a relationship with their employing organization is also consistent with studies of “attachments” to work organizations and unions. For example, commitment researchers have found support for the existence of a psychological bond in the eye of the employee (e.g., O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Peterson & Martin, 1986). Similarly, Lawler (1992: 327) has argued that “people form person-to-collectivity attachments that are theoretically and empirically distinct from person-to-person bonds.”

A different way of thinking about how people relate to organizations can be gained by considering the argument of Redfearn (1982: 215) who concluded that “in the natural, primitive way of psychic functioning, things are in fact persons.” Redfearn’s arguments
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suggest that individuals naturally and easily personify organizations and think of them in human terms.

**Moving from Single Attachments to Multiple Attachments.** The shift from reliance on physical proximity to psychological closeness also permits the development of multiple attachments. Physical proximity is the central means by which an infant obtains a feeling of security when threatened. But physical proximity is necessarily exclusive -- it is difficult to cling to two individuals at the same time. After physical proximity loses its status as the only means of feeling safe, it is no longer necessary for an individual to be restricted to a single attachment figure. Thus for a young adult, a close relationship with a peer may develop that functions similarly to and concurrently with a relationship with a parental attachment figure. Likewise, relationships with employing organizations may also develop and co-exist with other attachment relationships. This does not imply, however, that all relationships become attachment relationships. To be consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of attachment theory, for a relationship to qualify as an attachment relationship it must be highly significant to the individual, providing a “secure base” (Ainsworth, et al., 1978) that the individual can look to for support in times of trouble. For many individuals, their employment relationship is vitally important, providing not only economic benefits necessary for survival, but also a sense of social identity (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1985), and an attractive alternative to increasingly unmanageable home lives (Hochschild, 1997). Consequently, in this paper I focus on the organization as the “attachment figure” rather than other possibilities (e.g., co-workers, boss, occupational group). In making this choice I am assuming that, although individuals do differentiate among targets of commitment within an organization (e.g., Becker, 1992; Gregersen, 1993), the relationship to the organization as a whole matches more closely the characteristics of attachment relationships as identified in the developmental psychology literature.
The Organizational Attachment Relationship

The relationship between the individual and the organization is analogous to, but not exactly the same as, a childhood attachment relationship. For example, because the organization is an abstraction, the relationship is more dependent upon an individual’s projections of attitudes and motivations onto the organization. In contrast, in an interpersonal relationship, attitudes and motives can be discussed by both parties to the relationship. Another difference is that adults are often better able to cope when attachment bonds are threatened than are children (Parkes & Stevenson-Hinde, 1982). However, there are important overlaps. Both relationships typically: (1) include obligations and expectations about each party’s behavior; (2) have inherent power differences particularly in terms of access to important resources; (3) involve a strong and enduring affective bond; and (4) result in a sense of loss when the relationship is terminated (Parkes & Stevenson-Hinde, 1982).

More subject to debate is the perceived uniqueness and substitutability of the relationship, particularly since it is often possible to reduce many of the acts of the organization to acts of its representatives. Such a reduction, however, may not be representative of how the individual actually perceives the organization. Receipt of a paycheck involves authorization by one or more individuals, but most employees are probably unaware of who those individuals are. Instead, they view the receipt of their pay as coming from the organization. Providing compensation is only one way that the organization can serve as a “secure base” for its members (just as providing food is only one way that the mother serves as a “secure base” for her child). Other means of serving as a secure base may derive from the structures and norms reflected in the organization’s culture. For example, organizations that have structures in place to ensure that all employees are mentored or arrange social events to establish a feeling of community are
more likely to be viewed as sufficiently available and responsive to be a secure base than organizations where such structures are not in evidence. Proposition 1 suggests boundary conditions for when organizational relationships can appropriately be viewed as attachment relationships.

**Proposition 1:** The more individuals view their organizations as "secure bases" that are unique and irreplaceable, the more pronounced will be their organizational attachment behaviors when their employment relationships are threatened.

This is somewhat analogous to Robinson and Rousseau's (1994: 249) argument that "employees who place greater emphasis on the employment relationship itself will be more negatively influenced by the violation [of the psychological contract] than those who do not." In contrast, careerist individuals who are more focused on their career progression and less interested in the relationship to their current organization per se, would be less likely to respond to threats to security with traditional attachment behaviors. This does not suggest, however, that careerist individuals would not react negatively to threats to their current employment relationship, because career success is typically viewed as being based on decisions by the individual to move to a new company, not by their dismissal from their current organization.

**Origins of Organizational Attachment Styles**

An individual's organizational attachment style is not presumed to be the same as his or her interpersonal attachment style. There is reason, however, to believe that organizational and interpersonal attachment styles would tend to be highly correlated. Because individuals tend to personify the organizations that they work for, it is possible that their patterns of interacting with organizations would be consistent with their interpersonal attachment style. It is also possible that organizational attachment styles
may have other antecedents. For example, young children may learn ways of relating to organizations by listening to and observing their parent(s) or other adults in relationships with work organizations. Thus young children's exposure to models of employment relationships through television programming might have an effect on how those children come to enact their own employment relationships when they reach adulthood. It is also possible that organizational attachment styles are influenced by early socialization experiences in an individual's initial employment experience. Organizational socialization is likely to work in conjunction with other antecedents of organizational attachment styles, however, because it is unlikely that individuals enter organizations without some expectations about what the employment relationship will be like.

The existence of different organizational attachment styles provides a compelling explanation for some of the differences that we may observe in individuals' behavior in organizations. Drawing on theory and research from the attachment literature, Table 1 summarizes how typical experiences with the attachment figure and the resulting mental models and internalized behavioral patterns that result are related to three attachment styles. These descriptions are used to support the propositions developed in the following sections.

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Insert Table 1 about here
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**Explaining Behavior Using the Concept of Organizational Attachment Styles**

When an organizational attachment relationship exists, organizational attachment styles are posited to influence behavior through a two-stage process. For clarity of exposition these responses are discussed as though they result from conscious cognitive appraisal. In fact, it is expected that these processes occur at an unconscious level (e.g.,
Lazarus, 1991). First, as individuals monitor the environment for threats to their security, their organizational attachment styles influence their perceptions of information (e.g., does this information imply a threat to my employment security?). Second, when a threat is perceived, individuals respond by engaging in earlier learned patterns of behavior in their attempt to maintain the relationship. Such a response can be viewed in the context of regression, consistent with the work of Vince and Broussine (1996).

**Effects on Perceptions.** Information is almost always subject to interpretation. Expectations lead individuals to pay attention only to selected evidence and then to behave in ways that elicit the expected behaviors (Buss, 1991; Markus & Cross, 1990). For example, in a study of employees in a distressed organization, Hartley (1991: 129) found that “The same information was used by workers to support either their pessimistic or optimistic assessments about jobs in the future.” Attachment theory suggests that these different interpretations stem from differences in workers “mental models” of the employment relationship that are reflected in their organizational attachment styles. Of course, some information (e.g., announcement of a layoff) is more subject to interpretation than other information (e.g., announcement of a product design change).

**Proposition 2:** When information is equivocal, individuals’ organizational attachment styles will influence how they interpret that information.

Specifically, individuals with Secure organizational attachment styles will be less likely than other individuals to interpret that information as threatening to their employment relationship. Individuals with Avoidant styles will be more likely than other individuals to interpret that information as threatening to their employment relationship. Individuals with Ambivalent styles will be more likely to interpret that information as
threatening to their employment security than individuals with Secure organizational attachment styles, but less likely to perceive it as threatening than individuals with Avoidant organizational attachment styles.

**Effects on Behaviors.** Once a threat to employment security has been perceived, organizational attachment styles are posited to affect individuals’ behavior in response to that threat. Two basic types of behavior, citizenship and work withdrawal (not exit) are especially important to consider because they can be linked to the types of attachment and resistance behaviors that have been evaluated in studies of attachment in developmental psychology. To the extent that there is agreement about what the individual can do to reduce the threat to employment security (e.g., arrive at work on time, produce quality output), then these types of behaviors should be expected when the employment relationship is threatened. However, we know from anecdotal reports and organizational research that not all individuals react in the same way when employment security is threatened (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Nussbaum, 1986). For example, using simulated mergers, Astrachan (1990) found that individuals responded to news of layoffs in different ways. “Some became angry and somewhat destructive, others became withdrawn and increasingly nonproductive, and others seemed to be inviting ‘burn-out’ as they threw themselves into their work with ever greater zeal.” (p. 1).

**Citizenship Behavior.** Engaging in citizenship behaviors binds the individual more closely to the organization by reinforcing the link between the well-being of the organization and the actions of the individual. Thus the display of citizenship behaviors can be understood as attachment-seeking behaviors that serve to bring the individual into closer psychological contact with the attachment figure. For example, threats to employment security may lead to an increase in citizenship behaviors as some individuals attempt to reinforce their attachment to the organization, much as Secure children in
Ainsworth’s (1982) studies attempted to obtain contact with their attachment figures when they felt threatened. This also would be consistent with Astrachan’s (1990) finding that when a layoff was announced some people “threw themselves into their work,” a behavior which would appear to benefit their organization.

The contrary behavior on the part of Avoidant infants suggests that individuals who do not believe that any actions on their part would increase their chances of reducing the threat (i.e., remaining employed) would not seek to obtain contact and thus would be unlikely to engage in citizenship behaviors. Ambivalent individuals, because of their uncertainty about whether the attachment figure can be relied upon, may vacillate, sometimes displaying citizenship behaviors, but other times not. Evidence from studies of adult romantic relationships also supports the view that different attachment styles may predict the level of certain types of supportive, citizenship-like, behaviors. For example, Simpson, et al., (1992: 434) found that “persons with more secure attachment styles behaved differently than persons with more avoidant styles in terms of physical contact, supportive comments, and efforts to seek and give emotional support.”

**Proposition 3:** Organizational attachment styles will influence individuals citizenship behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is threatened.

Specifically, individuals with Secure organizational attachment styles will consistently engage in citizenship behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is threatened. Individuals with Avoidant organizational attachment styles will not engage in citizenship behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is threatened. Individuals with Ambivalent organizational attachment styles will
inconsistently (sometimes but not always) engage in citizenship behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is threatened.

**Work Withdrawal.** From an attachment theory perspective, work withdrawal behaviors (e.g., daydreaming on the job or doing poor quality work but not actually leaving the organization) represent an attempt by the employee to distance him- or herself from the organization. In effect, the employee is defensively ignoring the organization when engaging in these types of activities. Studies show that Avoidant infants and adults in romantic relationships are most likely to display patterns of behavior that include withdrawal from an attachment figure (Ainsworth, et al., 1978; Simpson, et al., 1992). In contrast, Secure infants do not typically display withdrawal behaviors (Ainsworth, et al., 1978) nor do adults with secure attachment styles (Simpson, et al., 1992). Ambivalent infants and adults typically display inconsistent patterns of behavior, sometimes withdrawing but other times trying to obtain proximity to an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1973, 1982). Given the express goal of maintaining the organizational relationship, engaging in these types of work withdrawal behaviors does not appear “rational.” They are, however, consistent with the patterns of behaviors that Avoidant and Ambivalent-style individuals have internalized based on their prior experiences in relationships. If the employee is terminated, this serves only to reinforce the idea that the organization cannot be relied upon.

**Proposition 4:** Organizational attachment styles will influence individuals work withdrawal behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is threatened.

Specifically, individuals with Secure organizational attachment styles will not engage in work withdrawal behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is
threatened. Individuals with Avoidant organizational attachment styles will consistently engage in work withdrawal behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is threatened. Individuals with Ambivalent organizational attachment styles will inconsistently (sometimes but not always) engage in work withdrawal behaviors when they perceive that their employment security is threatened.

DISCUSSION

In this paper I have argued that individuals develop patterns of attachment to organizations that are analogous to interpersonal patterns of attachment and that these patterns of attachment affect perceptions and behaviors, especially when those organizational attachments are threatened. In this final section of the paper I discuss this new approach to thinking about employment relationships in terms of its theoretical contributions, implications for practice, and future research considerations.

Theoretical Contributions

This paper continues a trend in the literature to take more account of deep-seated psychological processes and how they may influence behavior in organizations. Many researchers have begun to recognize the role that unconscious psychological processes can play in influencing organizational behavior (e.g., bureaucracy as a consequence of psychological defenses by Diamond, 1993a; leadership characteristics by Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; commitment by Staw & Ross, 1978). Some researchers have explicitly considered the influence of childhood factors in shaping adult behaviors (e.g., characteristics of highly driven executives by Kaplan, 1991; stances toward authority by Hirschhorn, 1990 and by Kahn & Kram, 1994). Indeed recent work by Kahn and colleagues (Kahn, 1990; Kahn & Kram, 1994) has explicitly recognized the importance of
attachment theory as a foundation for understanding authority relationships. Kahn and Kram (1994: 21) assert that “people are drawn to create or enact authority relations partly on the basis of compelling, deep-seated personality attributes of which they may be only partly aware.”

An organizational attachment perspective broadens the theoretical foundations of the commitment literature by recognizing that employees may be unconsciously reproducing patterns of behavior when their employment security is threatened. Thus, actions that appear to be incomprehensible from a rational decision framework can be explained by an attachment framework. For example, attachment theory helps to make sense of why some employees respond to news of a layoff by becoming less productive, others become more productive, and some become angry and destructive (Astrachan, 1990: 1). Much of the commitment literature has focused on the employment relationship from the perspective of the organization: how do we get people to contribute more. An attachment perspective makes the point that an individual’s relationship with the organization is not the result of a simple, rational process. Although an oversimplification, the existing commitment literature can be thought of as focusing on getting something in the organization “right” (e.g., “get the incentives right,” “get the values right,” “get the norms right”) to obtain employee commitment and related behaviors that benefit the organization. These types of commitment processes assume, however, that everyone is working from similar perceptions and expectations. By taking an interactive view that reflects both individual differences as well as situational factors, attachment theory provides a more nuanced understanding of why an individual’s behavior may not meet the organization’s expectations even when the organization thinks it has gotten all the situational factors “right.”
An organizational attachment perspective also provides insights into the organizational identification process, complementing existing work that focuses on situational cues for fostering identification and deep structure identification processes (Rousseau, 1998). Of particular interest is the way in which organizational attachment styles may help us to understand why different employees interpret the same action in different ways. For example, to an employee with a Secure organizational attachment style a Christmas bonus may be interpreted as "a tribute to the employment relationship itself" while for the Avoidant employee it may simply be seen as "mere pay" (see Rousseau, 1998: 222). Thus, organizational attachment style may be an important antecedent that can help predict and explain the extent to which individuals identify with their employing organizations.

Implications for Practice

Underlying the attachment perspective discussed in this paper is an assumption that employees and organizations will both be better off if employees are comfortable with their psychological attachment to their employing organization. Employees benefit by having their needs for belongingness and security satisfied. Organizations benefit by having more committed employees who are willing to engage in extra-role behaviors that serve the organization. Thus, with respect to practice, the next step is to use the insights of the attachment perspective for designing employment relationships that provide a sense of belongingness and security and still provide for the level of organizational flexibility needed to respond to rapid changes in the business environment. Designing such relationships will naturally require some trial and error, but having a more thorough understanding of the psychodynamics of the employment relationship should greatly facilitate this process.
One way in which companies may help to create a “secure base” for employees is by expanding traditional ideas about internal labor markets. For example, as reported by the Wall Street Journal, industry leaders including AT&T, GTE, Lucent Technologies, TRW, Unisys, and UPS have created a consortium called the Talent Alliance (Lancaster, 1997). This joint project is designed to help increase job security, not within a single company, but across a number of companies. Employees of member companies have access to career development information as well as job market information. As a result of improved skills and more information on opportunities, employees should feel more confident about their ability to maintain or find new employment relationships.

Developing innovative solutions to the problem of meeting the needs of organizations as well as employees requires that we have a clear understanding of what is important to both parties to the relationship. Improving our understanding of employees’ needs and desires requires us to continue to probe beneath the surface to illuminate the psychodynamics of the employment relationship.

Future Research Considerations

The attachment theory framework proposed in this paper is has much promise for improving our understanding the employment relationship. Fulfilling that promise requires that we take seriously the idea that deep psychological processes such as attachment can and do influence behavior in organizations. Our first task must be to develop and validate methods for assessing organizational attachment styles. Different methods for assessing organizational attachment styles could be developed from existing research on adult attachment styles. For example, Hazan and Shaver (1987) used self-report categorical descriptions to classify individuals and Simpson (1990) used a thirteen item Likert-type measure. However, these types of self-reported Likert-type scales raise some fundamental questions about the accuracy of the assessments. While some
techniques, such as controlling for social desirability may improve the validity of these types of measures, other alternatives should also be explored. One alternative is to use an expert interviewer to meet with and assess individuals. For example, the Adult Attachment Interview developed by George, Kaplan, and Main (1985) allows trained interviewers to classify individuals' by adult attachment style based on their responses to questions about their early attachment-related experiences. While the techniques for correctly interviewing and evaluating individuals can be difficult to learn, with proper training it should be possible to generate reliable measures of organizational attachment based on these types of procedures.

In addition to developing valid measures of organizational attachment styles, learning more about when and how those styles develop is critical to this stream of research. Although a variety of variables could be explored, one of the most promising is interpersonal attachment style. Because individuals tend to personify organizations, their patterns of interacting with organizations are likely to be consistent with their interpersonal attachment style. Further support for this correlation comes from studies of job attitudes that have found evidence of an impact of early dispositions on later attitudes. For example, Staw, et al. (1986) found that affective dispositions measured in adolescence could be used to predict job attitudes over the course of an individual's life. Related to the question of antecedents is the issue of stability of organizational attachment styles. Clearly, the more stable these styles are, the more powerful the theory is. Future research should include longitudinal studies to allow researchers to evaluate the stability of organizational attachment styles as well as conditions that might lead to changes in those styles. Cross-cultural studies to determine whether organizational attachment styles are consistent in different cultures would also be useful. Studies of infant attachment across cultures have found, for example, that proportions of infants in
the different attachment style categories differ between the US and Japan (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 237)

After developing the groundwork in terms of measurement, links need to be made between organizational attachment and other streams of research. In addition to the connections to commitment and organizational identification discussed earlier, attachment theory may shed light on other areas. For example, studies to determine whether or not individuals self select into occupations and organizations based upon their organizational attachment style would be valuable for understanding more about issues of person-organization fit. Research in this area might also be valuable for identifying characteristics of individuals who are successful in adapting to life as peripheral versus core employees.

Research on coping with job loss may also benefit from taking an attachment perspective. For example, Leana, Feldman, and Tan (1998) note that job losers who are most concerned about disruptions to their career focus on problem-focused coping to regain employment as quickly as possible. In contrast, laid off individuals who are most concerned about the impact of their layoff on their family and friends engage in symptom-focused strategies including searching for social support. Viewed from an attachment theory perspective, it appears that in both these cases the individuals are engaging in behaviors that are targeted toward increasing their connection to what they have identified as their most important attachment “partners.” In the case of the job seekers, it appears that attachment to the work organization is the most central. In the case of social support, it is the attachment to other individuals that appears most central.

Conclusion
Organizational Attachment

Recently, employees across a broad range of occupations and levels have seen substantial reductions in their employment security (Fortune, 1992; Freedman, 1986; Nussbaum, 1986). Business periodicals and television news stories routinely report major layoffs, shifts toward more temporary employees, and business closings (Gordon, 1990; Hoerr, 1983; Marks, 1988). Even as the U.S. economy has strengthened and unemployment has fallen, many individuals are still exposed to corporate restructuring and mergers that negatively affect their job security. How individuals respond to these potential threats to their employment relationships directly affects the well-being of organizations and their employees. Understanding employees' reactions to these ongoing changes in employment relationships is vital if we hope to influence those reactions for the benefit of business organizations and the individuals who work in them.
References


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TABLE 1: Characteristics of Attachment Styles Under Conditions of Threat

Secure
Experience with attachment figure: Positive, attachment figure responded to requests in a supportive and consistent manner
Mental model of relationship: Attachment figure is available, reliable, and responsive: a “secure base” to be trusted
Internalized behavioral response: Engage in standard attachment behaviors with expectation that they will be responded to appropriately (e.g., doing extra tasks, spending more time at the office)

Avoidant
Experience with attachment figure: Negative, requests were not responded to by attachment figure
Mental model of relationship: Attachment figure is unavailable and unreliable: requests will not be responded to
Internalized behavioral response: Engage in resistant/distancing behaviors to minimize disappointment over lack of responsiveness (e.g., avoiding work, staying out of the office)

Ambivalent
Experience with attachment figure: Inconsistent, attachment figure sometimes responded to requests but not always
Mental model of relationship: Attachment figure is unpredictable: responsiveness to requests is uncertain and irregular
Internalized behavioral response: Engage in both attachment behaviors and resistant behaviors because it is unclear whether requests will be responded to (e.g., spending more time at the office but avoiding work)
In developmental psychology, these latter categories are labeled “Anxious-Avoidant” and “Anxious-Ambivalent.” Brennan, Shaver, & Tobey (1991) note that a more recently discovered fourth pattern, “Disoriented/disorganized” (Main & Solomon, 1990) appears to be consistent with the Avoidant style, but is dismissing of intimacy, rather than anxious or fearful of intimacy.