
Attachment Orientation and Leadership Style: The Effect of Avoidant Attachment Priming on Relational Leadership

Jaclyn A. VanSloten

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Melanie Henderson

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

The present study examined causal relationships between attachment orientations—one’s working model for close relationships—and subsequent leadership styles. Individuals with secure attachment orientations demonstrate individual consideration and intellectual stimulation towards their followers, and individuals with anxious attachment orientations demonstrate a preoccupation with relationships. In contrast, individuals with avoidant attachment orientations are comparatively uninvolved in their interpersonal relationships, indicating discomfort with closeness/interdependence and inattentiveness to relationship-relevant information. These qualities may lead individuals with avoidant attachment orientations to exhibit less relational leadership, characterized by a concern with developing and maintaining good relationships, than individuals with secure or anxious attachment orientations. We found that participants primed with avoidant attachment conditions did indeed demonstrate less relational leadership than participants primed with secure, anxious, or neutral attachment conditions. The present findings may allow researchers to develop interventions to create more effective leaders.

Recently, a new vein of attachment theory research has focused on the relationship between attachment and leadership. Although attachment theory originally examined only relationships between infants and caregivers (Bowlby, 1969), attachment orientations also influence relationships between adults (Doverspike, Hollis, Justice, & Polomsky, 1997; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). For example, attachment orientations strongly impact the quality of romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and may also influence workplace relationships between leaders and followers (Doverspike et al., 1997). In addition, whether or not leaders prefer to have strong relationships with coworkers is associated with differences in attachment orientations (Doverspike et al., 1997). The current study employed attachment and leadership measures to identify the causal relationships between attachment orientations and subsequent leadership styles, which may allow researchers to develop interventions to create more effective leaders.

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) extended Bowlby’s (1968) work on attachment theory by identifying three attachment orientations: secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant. The secure orientation is characterized by trust, high self-esteem, an ability to seek out social support, and comfort with intimacy and independence. The anxious/ambivalent orientation is characterized by fear of rejection and abandonment, worry regarding the partner’s emotions, and preoccupation with intimacy and close relationships. The avoidant attachment orientation is characterized by distrust of others’ intentions, preference for emotional distance over investment, and discomfort with close relationships and intimacy. Although these attach-

Author note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jaclyn A. VanSloten, 35 West Wacker Floor 12, Chicago IL 60601. Contact: jaclyn.vansloten@gmail.com.

ment orientations were initially applied only to relationship between infants and caregivers, Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that these orientations also characterize relationships between adults.

Other research has further validated the theory's robustness, diverging from the past focus on intimate relationships and examining organizational applications instead: Doverspike et al. (1997) were among the first to explore the influence of attachment orientation on leadership styles. Securely attached individuals derive greater satisfaction from meaningful interpersonal relationships, whereas avoidant individuals are more satisfied by successful task performance. Consequently, secure attachment orientation is positively associated with a relational leadership style, characterized by a concern with developing and maintaining good relationships (Doverspike et al., 1997). In contrast, avoidant attachment orientation is associated with a task-oriented leadership style, characterized by a focus on rewards and recognitions. In practice, avoidant leaders in the military have deficits in both emotion-focused and task-focused situations (i.e., taking into account the emotional needs of followers and striving towards the completion of group tasks, respectively); whereas high anxiety leaders interfere with soldiers' functioning in task-focused situations, but aid in soldiers' functioning in emotion-focused situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

More recently, Popper and Amit (2009) suggested that differences in attachment orientations may account for variations in leadership styles, particularly with respect to relational leadership. Individuals with secure attachment orientations demonstrate charisma, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation towards their followers, while individuals with anxious attachment orientations are preoccupied with relationships (Popper, Mayseless, & Castelnovo, 2000). These qualities may lead individuals with secure and anxious attachment orientations to exhibit more relational leadership than individuals with avoidant attachment orientations, who tend to indicate discomfort with closeness/interdependence and inattentiveness to relationship-relevant information (Popper et al., 2000). We therefore propose that avoidant attachment may result in less relational leadership than secure or anxious attachment.

This potential causal relationship between attachment orientation and leadership style has yet to be explored, and the present study sought to address this gap in the literature. Determining the causal relationship between attachment orienta-

tions and leadership styles may provide an opportunity for the development of interventions within organizations. For instance, if an avoidant attachment orientation results in less relational leadership, reducing avoidant attachment orientations in leaders may facilitate the use of relational strategies that address people-focused objectives. Interventions designed to improve leadership may create workplaces that are more efficient and therefore improve productivity, success, and morale.

In the current study, we manipulated participants' attachment orientations and measured their subsequent leadership styles. We hypothesized that participants primed with avoidant attachment would be less likely to advocate relational strategies than those primed with secure, anxious, or neutral attachment.

METHOD

Participants. The sample consisted of 144 undergraduate introductory psychology students at a large public university (74 males, 70 females: mean age = 18.64). The race breakdown was as follows: 79% identified as "White"; 9.8% as "Asian"; 3.5% as "Black or African American"; 2.1% as "Hispanic or Latino"; 3.5% as "Multiracial"; 1.4% as "Other"; and .7% as "Don't Know/Not Sure". Participants received course credit for their participation.

Measures

Reliability for all scales and sub-scales was assessed using Chronbach's alpha. All scales and sub-scales yielded sufficient reliability (alphas approximated to .70 or greater).

Experiences in close relationships – short. The shortened version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) assesses adult attachment orientation on a continuous anxiety-avoidance scale. This scale assumes that securely attached individuals demonstrate low anxiety (e.g., "I make group members feel at ease when talking with them") and avoidance (e.g., "I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close"). This 12-item short scale is as valid as its former 36-item full-length scale, and is rated on a 7-point scale (1 = "disagree strongly" to 7 = "agree strongly"). Six of these items assess anxiety, while the other six assess avoidance.

Experimental attachment prime. The attachment prime (Gillath & Schachner, 2006) assumes that attachment orientations are malleable and attempts to override current attachment orientations in favor of anxious, avoidant, or secure attachment. The attachment prime consists of four randomly assigned conditions: anxious, avoidant, secure, and neutral. In the anxious, avoidant, and secure conditions, participants are asked to read descriptions of the particular attachment orientation and write about a time that this attachment orientation was experienced in a close relationship. In contrast, in the neutral condition, participants are asked to write about an acquaintance that the subject has no strong feelings toward. The neutral prime served as a control in the present study.

State adult attachment measure. The State Adult Attachment Measure (Gillath, Hart, Nofhle, & Stockdale, 2009) assesses participants' current attachment orientations. This continuous attachment measure assessed participants' current attachment orientations with respect to anxiety (e.g. "I wish someone would tell me they really love me"), avoidance (e.g. "If someone tried to get close to me, I would try to keep my distance") and security (e.g. "I feel like others care about me"). The measure consists of 21 items on a 7-point rating scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "agree strongly"). This state measure served as a manipulation check of our experimental measure.

Leader behavior description questionnaire-revised (LBDQ-R). The Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire-Revised (Halpin & Winer, 1957) assesses participants across the initiating structure and consideration categories. Whereas initiating structure reflects the leader's tendency to employ relations with subordinates based on goal attainment (e.g. "I assign group members to particular tasks"), consideration reflects the leader's focus on strengthening the leader-subordinate relationship (e.g. "I make group members feel at ease when talking with them"). Initiating structure is synonymous with task-focused leaderships, and consideration with relational leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). The revised version of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire consists of 10 items on a 5-point rating scale (0 = "not at all" to 4 = "frequently, if not always"). Five of these items assess initiating structure and the other five assess consideration.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the University's subject pool and the study was administered online. After providing consent, participants filled out the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale – Short, to assess continuous attachment orientation with respect to anxiety and avoidance. Participants then provided demographic information (e.g. age, race, and gender) and completed a distracter task to ensure that self-assessed attachment did not influence the effect of the subsequent attachment prime. The distracter task consisted of a letter counting exercise, in which participants were asked to count the "t's" in a highly technical, scientific passage on periaqueductal gray matter (Weber & Pert, 1989). Participants were then notified that they were entering part two of the study. The two parts of the study were created to disassociate the subject of chronic attachment in part one of the study from primed attachment and leadership measures in part two of the study.

The attachment prime was presented at the beginning of part two. Participants were instructed to read a paragraph and respond to it for 5-7 minutes. A randomized attachment style prompt consisting of four attachment conditions (avoidant, secure, anxious and neutral) followed the instructions page. Participants then completed the state attachment measure as a manipulation check and the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire-Revised to assess participants' leadership styles. Finally, participants were debriefed.

RESULTS

One-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) were used to analyze the effects of the attachment prime on the manipulation check (i.e., the state attachment measure) as well as on relational and transactional leadership measures.

Experimental Attachment Prime Effects on Adult State Attachment Measure. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of the attachment prime on the State Adult Attachment Measure, $ps > .32$. The attachment prime did not have a significant effect on the State Adult Attachment Measure as intended. Nonetheless, with the exception of the secure attachment prime, the means of the conditions were in the expected directions.

Utilizing one-way ANOVAs to assess the relationship between the attachment prime measure and leadership measure sub-scales, we found a significant difference between groups on relational leadership, $F(3, 129) = 2.79, p = .04$. Tukey post-hoc tests revealed that participants in the avoidant condition were less likely to advocate consideration or relational leadership ($M = 3.76, SD = .07$) than participants in the anxious ($M = 4.01, SD = .07$), secure ($M = 3.93, SD = .07$), or neutral ($M = 3.98, SD = .07$) conditions, $ps < .05$. There was no main effect of the attachment prime on initiating structure or task-focused leadership, $p = .66$.

DISCUSSION

The present research explored the causal relationships between attachment orientations and subsequent leadership styles. As predicted, we found that participants primed with avoidant attachment were less likely to advocate relational leadership than those primed with secure, anxious or neutral attachment. This finding suggests that avoidant attachment may reduce the ability to recognize and incorporate contextual and relational cues and therefore the aptitude to understand the higher needs of followers, such as self-actualization, esteem, and belonging.

The present findings support Popper's (2002) claim that avoidant leaders do not possess the same relational qualities that secure and anxious leaders do, as a result of their perceptions of themselves and of others. Although secure and anxious individuals differ in how they view themselves (positively and negatively, respectively), they both hold positive perceptions of others. Thus, secure leaders possess empathy and show emotional involvement in others (Popper, 2002), and anxious leaders pay more attention to the needs of others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), which may lead securely and anxiously oriented leaders to engage in more relational leadership. In contrast, avoidant individuals hold positive perceptions of themselves but negative perceptions of others (Popper et al., 2000), and demonstrate less compassion and altruistic helping (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). These qualities of avoidant leaders may explain the present finding that avoidant leaders engage in less relational leadership.

However, one limitation of the present study concerns the manipulation check. Although we predicted that priming attachment would affect the

individual's reported state attachment, there was no statistically significant effect of primed attachment orientation on subsequent attachment orientations. The writing exercise that the prime consisted of may not have been substantial enough or sufficiently involving to significantly affect the individuals' attachment orientations. The non-significant effects could also have been due to the placement of the State Adult Attachment Measure within the study. In order to avoid the possible demand effects of completing the state attachment items immediately after the explicit relationship-relevant attachment prime, the state measure was not placed directly after the prime. Nonetheless, there was a significant relationship between the attachment prime and leadership styles. Although there were no effects of the prime on attachment orientations at an explicit level, it is possible that the prime could have influenced attachment orientations on an implicit level, as may be suggested by previous research on the implicit effects of attachment primes (Bartz & Lydon, 2004). In follow-up research, it may be helpful to include the state measure directly after the attachment prime to determine whether the prime has an immediate effect on attachment orientation.

Another limitation is that the present study does not explain the process by which attachment orientation affects leadership style. Although Popper and Amit (2009) suggest that low levels of trait anxiety and high openness to experience mediate the influence of secure attachment on leader development, more research is necessary to identify other potential mediators between attachment orientation and leadership style. For instance, perspective-taking and inclusivity may be viable venues for exploration. Both of these potential mediators are related to perceptions of the self and others, which Popper et al. (2000) suggest are related to differences in attachment orientations. Perspective-taking is characterized by the individual's tendency to spontaneously adopt other peoples' point of view (Davis, 1980), and inclusivity is characterized by the perceived interdependence between the individual and other entities (Leary, Tipsord & Tate, 2008). Individuals who score high in perspective-taking or inclusivity may advocate more relational leadership, whereas those who score low in perspective-taking or inclusivity may advocate less relational leadership. Finally, testing the effects of various attachment primes on leadership strategies may provide further insight into whether current attachment orientations affect concurrent leadership practices.

Reducing avoidant attachment orientations among leaders may facilitate the use of more relational strategies that address people-focused objectives. The present findings therefore have broader implications; improved leadership has the potential to improve productivity, success, and morale for all organizational systems.

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