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Attachment theory at work: A review and directions for future research

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Summary

The influence of attachment theory on organizational scholarship is growing, with more articles published on the subject in the past 5 years than the preceding 25 years combined. Prior research and reviews have primarily focused on attachment styles and their relationship with organizational outcomes. However, in the past 5 years, organizational scholars have begun exploring new directions in attachment research such as situational influences on attachment states, attachment as a moderating variable, and attachment as a dynamic process in various forms of work relationships. These advances offer new directions for organizational behavior research, notably through the lens of the attachment behavioral system—an innate psychological system that accounts for why and how people seek support from others. In this paper, we provide an overarching framework for understanding attachment dynamics in organizations and review key findings from attachment theory research on dyadic relationships, group dynamics, and the employee–organization relationship. We further discuss promising areas for future organizational research on attachment, as well as methodological developments in the priming of attachment states.

KEYWORDS

attachment theory, employment relationships, leadership, mentoring, work relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

The propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals [is] a basic component of human nature (*John Bowlby*).

Why and how do people develop emotional bonds with others at work? What are the characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of these bonds? How do conditions or events in the work environment influence the development, maintenance, and/or dissolution of the bonds between employees or work-related entities? These questions share two things in common. First, they are each fundamental questions in the study of organizational behavior, cutting across important research domains such as leadership, mentoring, group processes, and the employee–organization relationship. Second, each of these questions can be informed by attachment theory.

Attachment theory is an established theory of human relationships and among the most influential theories in psychology (Finkel & Simpson, 2015). The theory is centrally concerned with the cognitive–affective processes of “attachment,” defined as the human propensity

to seek and develop affectional bonds to particular others (Bowlby, 1969). Although Bowlby (1969) was concerned with parent–child relationships, research on adult attachment has identified similar attachment dynamics in organizational relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). This includes relationships with leaders, coworkers, mentors, and the organization as sources of social support and membership.

Attachment theory provides a distinct relational perspective to the study of organizational behavior. In particular, researchers have established how attachment dynamics in work relationships are directly related to valued organizational outcomes such as follower proactivity (Wu & Parker, 2017), ethical decision making (Chugh, Kern, Zhu, & Lee, 2014), effective negotiation behavior (Lee & Thompson, 2011), and creative problem solving (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Rom, 2011). In contrast, when a person's attachment needs are not fulfilled, negative consequences tend to follow. In a work context, this includes increased stress (Schirmer & Lopez, 2001), higher reports of burnout (Littman-Ovadia, Oren, & Lavy, 2013), and increased turnover (Tziner, Ben-David, Oren, & Sharoni, 2014), among other undesired outcomes.

In short, perspectives from attachment theory have informed a range of organizational phenomena. What's more, though, is that the

influence of attachment theory on organizational scholarship is also growing. As shown in Figure 1, there has been a steady rise in peer-reviewed papers on attachment research in the workplace. In fact, of the papers from the last 30 years (from 1986 to 2016), nearly 50% were published after 2010.

Given the substantive contributions of attachment theory to organizational scholarship, our objective in this paper is to provide a review of current work-related attachment research. In doing so, we integrate and advance organizational scholarship in two fundamental ways. First, compared to earlier work, our review offers a more inclusive lens on the various means by which attachment theory has been applied in workplace contexts. For instance, in the most comprehensive review to date, Harms (2011) took a specific focus on individual differences in attachment styles, and more specifically, the relationship between attachment styles and workplace outcomes such as leader effectiveness, trust, and job attitudes. In this review, we address research on attachment styles, the priming of attachment states, and other attachment-related processes. We further focus primarily on research published after Harms's (2011) earlier work. As evidenced in Figure 1, this represents a considerable body of research. Also, where attachment styles are of interest, we devote specific attention to identifying advances in this area of research such as tests of attachment style congruence in dyadic relationships (Mitchell, Eby, & Ragins, 2015) and the use of attachment style as a mediating and moderating variable (Dahling & Librizzi, 2015).

A second contribution of the current review is the emphasis given to future work-related attachment research. We address future research in three ways. First, we identify avenues for future inquiry specific to each research domain reviewed. These discussions appear at the end of applicable sections pertaining to dyadic, group, and employee–organization relationships. Second, we include a general discussion of future research opportunities that cut across organizational behavior themes. This includes how a network lens may inform work-related attachment research, how workplace interventions could influence relationship-specific attachments, and how advances in attachment research in social psychology can be applied to organizational research. Finally, we provide an integrated summary of measures previously used in attachment theory research and discuss implications for future studies.

Our review begins with a discussion of attachment theory and the attachment behavioral system. We then describe our review

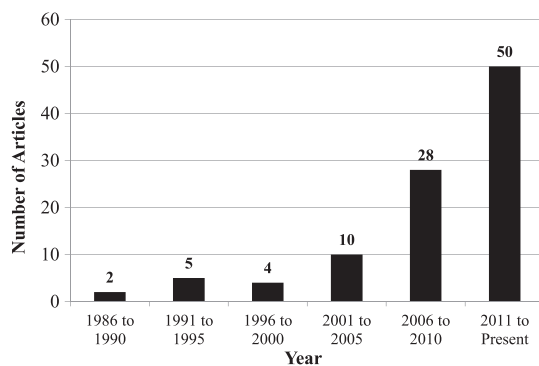


FIGURE 1 Peer-reviewed work-related attachment articles from 1986 to 2016

methodology and provide a systematic look at recent attachment research across three core relational domains in organizational behavior: dyadic relationships, group dynamics, and the employee–organization relationship. Following this, we offer a summary of measures and methodological advances in attachment research. We then close with a general discussion of future research directions and practical implications.

2 | FOUNDATIONS OF ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory was originally developed by Bowlby (1969) in the study of early childhood relationships and later extended by Hazan and Shaver (1990) to the study of adult and work relationships. Bowlby (1969) described the dynamics of interpersonal attachment in the form of an *attachment behavioral system*—an innate psychological system that motivates people to seek support from others in times of need. More specifically, the attachment behavioral system “governs the selection, activation, and termination of behavior aimed at attaining protection and support from ... others” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009, p. 9). The attachment behavioral system further incorporates four key interrelated propositions, which are summarized in Table 1 and discussed below.

2.1 | Activation of the attachment behavioral system

According to Bowlby (1982), the attachment behavioral system is activated when a person is exposed to physical or psychological threat. When activated, the attachment behavioral system triggers a set of responses focused on fulfilling attachment needs by seeking support from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Research with adult populations has shown that the attachment behavioral system can also be activated in specific interpersonal situations (e.g., when receiving affirmation), or by priming people with memories of past relationships (Lee & Thompson, 2011). Attachment responses can likewise be triggered by organizational events. For example, Albert, Allen, Biggane, and Ma (2015) identified changes in the employment relationship as a trigger for attachment-seeking behaviors among employees.

Following the activation of the attachment behavioral system, its deactivation occurs upon receipt of social support. Put differently, receiving support in response to stress results in a feeling of “felt security.” However, when support is absent or inconsistent, the attachment behavioral system can become hyper-activated or suppressed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Over time, the reoccurrence of these positive or negative support experiences result in the formation of generalized working models of relationships, also known as *attachment styles*. Attachment styles are defined as cognitive–affective representations of the self and others in relationships, and their formation originally occurs on the basis of early caregiving relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). However, attachment styles have also been shown to change as people transition to more frequent interactions with others in adulthood (Hudson, Fraley, Chopik, & Heffernan, 2015).

TABLE 1 Attachment theory and the attachment behavioral system

| Central propositions of attachment theory | Empirical foundations | Contributions to organizational research |
|---|---|---|
| 1. The attachment behavioral system is activated by perceived threat or stress. When activated, the attachment behavioral system triggers a set of affective and relational responses to regulate the sense of threat. | Mikulincer et al. (2002) found that threat-related primes can activate mental representations of attachment figures in adult relationships. Similarly, a number of studies have established that adults respond to stress by seeking out an attachment figure in an attempt to restore emotional well-being (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002). | Research on the activation of the attachment behavioral system has contributed to a better understanding of organizational socialization (Nelson & Quick, 1991), leadership (Wu & Parker, 2017), group dynamics (Rom & Mikulincer, 2003), and employment relationships (e.g., Albert et al., 2015). |
| 2. A person's early relationship with caregivers results in the formation of internal working models of relationships, otherwise known as a <i>person's attachment style</i> . Attachment styles are cognitive-affective representations of self and others in relationships (Bowlby, 1973). The formation of attachment styles occurs in early caregiving relationships but have been found to change as people transition to more frequent interactions with others in adulthood. | Hazan and Shaver (1990) were among the first to examine the effects of employees' attachment styles at work. Organizational researchers have since illustrated that employees' attachment styles have the capacity to influence a variety of work-related attitudes and behaviors (for prior reviews, see Harms, 2011). | Attachment styles have been established as a predictor of interpersonal behavior in a number of organizational contexts, including leadership (Richards & Hackett, 2012), mentoring (Poteat et al., 2015, group dynamics (Lavy et al., 2015), and burnout (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2013). |
| 3. Attachment states can be primed by explicit and implicit cues. Working models of secure and insecure attachment can be primed through the recollection of attachment figures or specific attachment situations. The cognitive accessibility of these attachment states have been found to predict differences in people's attachment response over and above individual differences in attachment styles (Mikulincer et al., 2002). | Lee and Thompson (2011) found that the use of situational triggers can activate attachment states in adults. Repeatedly priming attachment security can lead to more long-term effects (i.e., 2 days after priming) on relationship- and self-views (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007). | The priming of attachment states has been used in a few organizational studies to date. This research has primarily assessed the effect of attachment on ethical decision making (Chugh et al., 2014) and negotiation behavior (Lee & Thompson, 2011). |
| 4. Secure attachment is a predictor of autonomous and creative behavior. Autonomy and exploration is a central outcome of secure attachment. More specifically, when the attachment system is deactivated, people are more likely to explore on their own, without the need to rely on attachment figures. This process is described as the <i>dependency paradox</i> (Feeney, 2007)—where relationships provide the condition for more individual autonomy and agency. | Secure attachment has been found to predict curiosity (Mikulincer, 1997), novelty seeking (Carnelley & Ruscher, 2000), and exploratory interest (Green & Campbell, 2000) in adults. Mikulincer (1997) found that securely attached people are less likely to prefer cognitive closure and were more likely to rely on new information in making decisions. Feeney (2004) was among the first to examine the effects of secure base support on autonomous goal striving, with adults in close relationships. | Attachment theory provides a relational perspective to a number of individual outcomes. More specifically, secure attachment has been found to predict follower proactivity (Wu & Parker, 2017) and ethical decision making (Chugh et al., 2014). |

2.2 | Working models and attachment styles

As noted, a key component of attachment theory is how early relationships with caregivers influence the development of internal working models of relationships, otherwise known as *attachment styles*. Attachment styles simultaneously reflect two distinct working models—one related to the self and one related to others. A working model of the self is represented by a person's belief of self-worth in receiving support. A working model of others is represented by a person's belief regarding the accessibility and availability of other people in times of need (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Together, these models have been found to predict feelings and behaviors that people adopt towards their work and employment relationships (Richards & Schat, 2011), as well as the degree to which individuals may be able to cope with stressors in the work environment (Johnstone & Feeney, 2015; Richards & Schat, 2011).

2.2.1 | Types of attachment styles

Building on Bowlby's (1973) concept of working models, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) were the first to develop a model defining different types of attachment styles. Specifically, Ainsworth

et al. identified three types of attachment styles based on infant reactions to the “strange situation” experiment, whereby infants' were observed when they were temporarily left alone by a caregiver. In short, infants who expressed distress upon their parent's departure but were easily reassured upon their return were labeled *secure*. Those who were not easily reassured upon their caregiver's return were labeled *anxious*, and those who appeared indifferent to the caregiver's comings and goings were labeled *avoidant*.

Anxious attachment refers to “the extent to which a person worries that others will not be available in times of need and anxiously seeks for their love and care” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015, p. 18). Attachment anxieties are shaped by experiences of unreliable support in caregiving relationships, resulting in a person's negative self-perception and preoccupation with affirmation from other people. Attachment anxiety is found to predict heightened arousal, lower levels of emotion regulation, and hyper-sensitivity to social and emotional cues from others (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006). *Avoidant attachment*, in contrast, refers to “the extent to which a person distrusts others' good will and defensively strives to maintain behavioral and emotional independence” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015, p. 18). An avoidant attachment orientation is shaped by neglectful caregiving

relationships, resulting in a negative perception of other people. This corresponds with a “deactivation of proximity seeking, inhibition of the quest for support, and active attempts to handle distress alone” (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003, p. 85). Finally, *secure attachment* represents a person's confidence that other people will be responsive and supportive when needed and is associated with greater levels of optimism, positive views of the self and others, confidence that help will be available in times of distress, and emotional stability (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015).

Hazan and Shaver (1990) were among the first researchers to examine the effects of employees' anxious, avoidant, and secure attachment styles in the workplace. Specifically, they found that securely attached respondents were “least likely to put off work, least likely to have difficulty completing tasks, and least likely to fear failure and rejection from coworkers” (p. 275). In contrast, employees with an anxious attachment style reported a greater fear of rejection from poor performance, whereas respondents with avoidant attachment tended to use work to avoid social interaction. Building on this pioneering work, organizational researchers have since illustrated that employees' attachment styles have the capacity to influence a variety of other work-related attitudes and behaviors as well. We return to these studies in our systematic review of attachment research related to dyadic, group, and employment relationships later in this manuscript.

2.2.2 | Other conceptualizations of attachment styles

The original three-component model of anxious, avoidant, and secure attachment styles developed by Ainsworth et al. (1978) remains the most popular among researchers. Bartholomew and colleagues (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), however, have proposed an alternative four-category model based on individuals' conceptions of “self” and “other.” Specifically, the four dimensions are labeled as *secure* (positive self, positive other), *dismissing* (positive self, negative other), *preoccupied* (negative self, positive other), and *fearful* (negative self, negative other) attachment styles. This model has been applied to workplace contexts by several researchers (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2015; Popper, Mayseless, & Castelnovo, 2000). As noted, though, it has been used less frequently than the three-component model developed by Ainsworth and her colleagues.

2.3 | Priming of attachment states

Although attachment styles have most often been conceived as trait-like working models of relationships, researchers observe that attachment styles can also be primed, creating “state attachments.” Specifically, experimental and intervention studies from social psychology have illustrated that the presentation of certain attachment-related stimuli (e.g., recalling a supportive relationship) can activate mental representations of attachment states (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These attachment states may have both strong and lasting implications. For example, the cognitive accessibility of attachment states has been shown to predict differences in attachment responses beyond individual differences in attachment styles (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Likewise, Carnelley and Rowe (2007) found that

repeatedly priming secure attachment had a sustained and positive effect on relationship expectations in couples.

In short, attachment theorists observe that the priming of attachment states can predict both relational and affective outcomes in relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Still, organizational researchers are only beginning to explore how the priming of attachment states can have applications for the workplace. This preliminary research has mostly focused on how priming secure attachment may influence ethical decision making. For example, in a series of laboratory studies, Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, and Chun (2010) showed that priming a state of secure attachment may reduce individuals' tendency to engage in unethical behavior. Chugh et al. (2014) similarly primed attachment security by asking individuals to recall a situation in which they felt comfortable depending on another person. Those receiving this attachment security prime were less likely to lie about their grade point average on a work application. Finally, in addition to studies involving ethical behavior, attachment priming has been used to examine individuals' negotiation behavior (Lee & Thompson, 2011).

2.4 | Felt security and autonomous behavior

Ultimately, the **goal of the attachment behavioral system is for individuals to obtain felt security through the fulfillment of two primary relationship functions: a safe haven and secure base support.** The safe haven function of relationships is represented by support and comfort under conditions of psychological or physical stress (Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). The secure base function of relationships is represented by support for a person's autonomy and exploration of their environment (Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). These relational functions are identified in attachment theory as necessary for optimal functioning across the life course and also apply to employees' experiences in organizational life (Wu & Parker, 2017). More specifically, **when attachment figures respond appropriately and consistently during times of stress, people experience felt security and are more likely to engage in autonomous behavior.** This has been described as the dependency paradox (Feeney, 2007)—where relationships provide the condition for more individual autonomy and agency. Bowlby (1988) described this process as similar to a military officer setting out on an expedition. The extent of bold exploration taken by the military officer depends on the strength and security of his/her base. When individuals' needs for security are not fulfilled, however, they would not be expected to experience felt security, and the likelihood of engaging in autonomous behavior is reduced.

2.5 | Contributions of attachment theory

As summarized in Table 1 and described above, attachment theory accounts for how people are shaped by prior caregiving experiences and how these experiences in turn influence a person's generalized perceptions, emotions, and behaviors towards other people. In addition, attachment theory recognizes that various stimuli may also induce more short-term attachment states, which can influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors independent of their more general attachment styles (Mikulincer et al., 2002). These theoretical tenants have the potential to inform all domains of organizational behavior involving

relational and affective processes. To this end, we focus on three such domains where attachment theory has had the most substantive influence in our following systematic review—specifically, research on dyadic relationships, group dynamics, and the employee–organization relationship. Before turning to this research, however, we first briefly describe our review method and inclusion criteria.

3 | REVIEW METHOD

To arrive at a comprehensive collection of articles in the organizational literature related to attachment theory, keyword searches were performed in EBSCO's Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, PsycArticles, and PsycInfo databases, as well as SAGE Premier and Google Scholar. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journals. The search was performed by limiting results to articles that contained both the word “attachment,” “secure base,” “safe haven,” “Bowlby,” or “Ainsworth” and keywords such as “job,” “work,” “organization,” “leader(ship),” “manager,” “management,” “coaching,” “mentoring,” “negotiation,” “negotiate,” “employment,” “employee,” “career,” “follower,” “teams,” “groups,” and “performance.”

From these results, several criteria were applied to limit the pool of relevant articles. First, articles unrelated to the workplace context were removed. Second, articles unrelated to attachment theory were removed, such as those involving organizational attachment, group attachment, or team attachment without referencing attachment theory directly. This process resulted in a final pool of 97 articles from journals including the *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *Journal of Applied Psychology*, among many others. Of the 97 articles identified for inclusion, 75 were not included in Harms's (2011) earlier review of attachment styles in the workplace, and 48 were published in 2011 or later.

4 | ATTACHMENT AND DYADIC RELATIONSHIPS

Attachment theory has had a substantive influence on research addressing two salient types of dyadic work relationships—leader–follower relationships and mentoring relationships.

4.1 | Leader–follower relationships

Within the leadership domain, attachment theory has informed research on a range of topics, including the dynamics of leader–follower relationships (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Hinojosa, McCauley, Randolph-Seng, & Gardner, 2014; Kahn & Kram, 1994), the role of supportive leader behavior (Wu & Parker, 2017), and trust in leadership (Frazier, Gooty, Little, & Nelson, 2015). The attachment behaviors of both followers and leaders have additionally received attention in this literature.

With respect to followers' attachment behaviors, follower expectations and behaviors towards leaders share similar characteristics to the support seeking dynamics identified in attachment theory. Research highlights that followers with inconsistent support from their leaders can become preoccupied with their own attachment needs

(Hudson, 2013). The activation of the attachment behavioral system in followers (through stress or inconsistent leader support) can result in followers distancing themselves from leaders (avoidant attachment) or engaging in attention seeking behaviors (anxious attachment) with consequences being counterproductive to work. For example, avoidant attached followers are less likely to trust their leaders (Harms, Bai, & Han, 2016), whereas anxious attached followers are hyper-sensitive to feedback and over-reliant on affirmation (Wu, Parker, & de Jong, 2014).

Research further highlights that subordinates' attachment styles influence their relationships with leaders and can even bias their perceptions of leadership. For example, one study found that anxiously attached followers rated their leaders as transformational even when leaders did not display transformational characteristics (Hansbrough, 2012). Similarly, subordinates with an avoidant attachment style may be resistant to leadership due to their prior experience with unsupportive relationships (Keller, 2003). These results suggest that the attachment needs of followers are projected onto leaders and shape the way followers evaluate leader behaviors. In contrast, followers with secure attachment orientations are likely to form more positive relationships with leaders. Frazier et al. (2015), for example, found that followers with secure attachment styles were more likely to trust their leaders and see their intentions as benevolent.

Attachment styles have also been found to correspond to particular leadership styles and behaviors. For example, Doverspike, Hollis, Justice, and Polomsky (1997) found that secure leaders were more likely to display a relational leadership style by expressing greater concern for the development of their followers. In contrast, the authors found an association between avoidant attachment orientation and task-oriented leadership in that avoidant leaders focused more on rewards and recognition. Secure attachment in leadership has also been found to predict a leader's ability to delegate work (Johnston, 2000) and follower perceptions of transformational leadership style (Popper et al., 2000). Finally, in addition to research on attachment styles, researchers have begun to apply the concept of secure base support in understanding the role of supportive leader behaviors on follower outcomes. In a two sample study of employees in the United States and China, for example, Wu and Parker (2017) found that leaders' secure base support predicted greater levels of role breadth self-efficacy and autonomous motivation among followers, which in turn predicted follower proactive work behaviors.

4.2 | Mentoring relationships

Attachment theory also features in research on mentoring relationships. To this end, scholars observe that mentoring relationships provide an exemplary context for research on attachment processes inasmuch as the connection between a mentor and protégé contains similar characteristics to familial attachment relationships (Wang, Noe, Wang, & Greenberger, 2009).

Despite these parallels, empirical applications of attachment theory to mentoring relationships are less frequent than in research on leader–follower relationships. Current research incorporating attachment theory in the mentoring arena has also focused primarily on the effects of mentors' and/or protégés' attachment styles. For example,

using a sample of doctoral student protégés and their mentor advisors, Allen, Shockley, and Poteat (2010) found that protégés' anxious attachment predicted both feedback seeking and the degree to which protégés accepted feedback from their mentors. Feedback acceptance, in turn, had implications for both the frequency of feedback and perceived quality of feedback. A subsequent analysis demonstrated that the protégés' commitment to the mentoring relationship mediated the relationships between protégés' anxious attachment and both feedback seeking and feedback acceptance (Poteat, Shockley, & Allen, 2015). Avoidant and anxious attachment styles have also been shown to negatively relate to individuals' willingness to mentor in the future, a finding which held for both mentors and protégés participating in a formal mentoring program in China (Wang et al., 2009).

4.3 | Dyadic perspectives

One key advancement spanning attachment research in both the leadership and mentoring arenas is scholars' increasing use of a dyadic perspective—in other words, the use of a theoretical and/or analytic framework that incorporates the attachment behaviors of both parties in the dyadic relationship. This approach is important as the relational orientations of both parties contribute to the quality of any relationship (Thomas, Martin, Epitropaki, Guillaume, & Lee, 2013). For example, in a study of 150 leader–follower dyads, Richards and Hackett (2012) found that both leaders' and followers' attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted lower evaluations of the relationship. Similarly, Keller and Cacioppe (2001) described how the combination of an avoidant leader and avoidant follower can result in mutual disengagement as both parties would be hesitant to invest in the relationship. Finally, in an ethnographic study of social workers, Kahn (1998) found that dysfunctional relationships between social workers and administrators resembled insecure attachment dynamics.

Mentor and protégé attachment styles have also been examined from a dyadic perspective. Using a sample of 82 dyads, Mitchell et al. (2015) applied polynomial regression and response surface methods to examine whether congruence between mentors' and protégés' level of secure attachment influenced protégé reports of perceived similarity with their mentor. Results offered some support for this view—however, only when reports of secure attachment were high for both the mentor and protégé. These findings suggest that a pattern of congruence did not emerge between shared secure attachment style and perceived similarity in all circumstances, speaking to the complexity of this relationship.

Finally, a few studies have adopted a dyadic view by examining the interaction between leader and follower attachment styles. For instance, Davidovitz et al. (2007) found that leaders with an avoidant attachment style were viewed by followers as less sensitive and available, which was in turn associated with a decrease in follower well-being over time. However, the effect was moderated by follower attachment style, such that followers with secure attachments did not experience a decrease in well-being with an avoidant leader. In another study, Kafetsios, Athanasiadou, and Dimou (2014) examined the interaction of attachment styles and emotional regulation capabilities of leaders and followers. The authors found an association between anxious attachment in leaders and greater negative affect

and lower job satisfaction in followers. Interestingly, they also found that this effect was moderated by followers' emotion regulation strategy. Followers who engaged in greater levels of emotion suppression were more likely to experience the negative emotional outcomes of avoidant leadership.

4.4 | Future research

The influence of attachment perspectives in leadership and mentoring research is growing; however, as evidenced in the preceding sections, the largest focus continues to be on individual attachment styles. With this in mind, we see several opportunities for future research involving dyadic relationships. First, we encourage researchers to examine shared traits between relationship parties. To this end, Mitchell et al. (2015) provide a useful model for other researchers in the application of polynomial regression and response surface techniques. This method is particularly useful in advancing research on dyadic fit in attachment styles.

An increased focus on shared attachment styles also has important practical applications, particularly for formal mentoring programs. In formal mentoring programs, protégés are matched with a mentor by a third party, and there is wide variation in the criteria considered in the matching process (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). Mentors' and protégés' attachment styles may be a useful criterion in determining such matches. To this end, Germain (2011) identified different combinations of mentor–protégé attachment styles, which may lead to positive relational outcomes. Extending this further, we recommend research that considers different types of mentoring relationships (e.g., peer mentoring and virtual mentoring) and how the effects of attachment styles might be moderated by the context and structure of dyadic work relationships.

Finally, we encourage researchers to address questions related to other components of the attachment behavioral system beyond attachment styles. Indeed, a few studies have begun to adopt this expanded lens, examining secure base support provided by leaders (Wu & Parker, 2017) and how a leader's support could aid in employees' sense of felt security (Hudson, 2013). In addition, Wang et al. (2009, p. 246) observed that “the formal and informal psychosocial and career-related functions mentors provide to protégés are similar to the safe haven and secure base” concepts described in attachment theory. Empirical research is needed, however, to better explicate these connections.

5 | ATTACHMENT AND GROUP DYNAMICS

Research on attachment and group dynamics can be divided into two areas: the effects of attachment styles on group-related outcomes and the phenomenon of group attachment.

5.1 | Attachment style influences on group-related outcomes

In regard to attachment styles and group-related outcomes, a few studies suggest that insecure attachment may offer some unique advantages. Due to their elevated concern for being accepted by

others, anxious individuals may be more alert to their own potential deficiencies and hyper-vigilant about seeking ways to improve. For example, attachment anxiety is positively related to feedback inquiry in groups, and inquiry has a positive effect on job performance, though only at high levels of attachment anxiety (Wu et al., 2014). Heterogeneity in attachment styles among group members has also been positively linked to team instrumental functioning when there is high team cohesion (Lavy, Bareli, & Ein-Dor, 2015).

Research has further shown that attachment styles affect the extent to which people seek shelter from their social groups under threat conditions. For example, in two experiments Crisp et al. (2009) found that people high in attachment anxiety were less likely to identify with and move towards groups following threats to a close relationship. However, people high in both anxiety and avoidance were more likely to do so. This is an important finding on group attachment—when employees face threat from a single attachment figure (e.g., boss or leader), they can turn to groups for attachment-related support.

5.2 | Groups as attachment figures

Unlike other research domains, the study of group attachment is one in which researchers have adopted a relationship-specific attachment approach from the beginning (as opposed to a focus on general attachment styles). In their seminal article, Smith, Murphy, and Coats (1999, p. 96) defined group attachment as “models [people hold] of themselves as group members and models of groups that in combination affect their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors regarding group memberships.” Though positively related to trait attachment styles, group attachments are distinct constructs that are affected by situational factors such as cohesion (Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). Similar to interpersonal attachments, Smith et al. (1999) proposed that group attachments have an evolutionary advantage insofar as groups offer resources, help under threat conditions, and are relationship-specific. That is, an individual can form unique attachment bonds with each social group of which they are a part. Individuals may also hold a general group attachment style that permeates how they relate to multiple social groups. Therefore, group attachment can be viewed as both relationship-specific and trait-like.

Group attachment is not a collective or group-level construct. Rather, it is an individual-level construct experienced in the context of groups that affects individual cognition, affect, and behavior (Lee & Ling, 2007). Similar to research that conceptualizes the organization as an attachment figure (see the next section of the current review), this literature approaches the group as a potential attachment figure and studies the extent to which an individual experiences felt security in the context of specific groups. Individuals high in group attachment anxiety keep problems to themselves to avoid conflict and hold negative views of themselves as members of a group, whereas those high in group attachment avoidance are less willing to accommodate group wishes and identify less with groups (Smith et al., 1999). Although a relatively small literature, the study of group attachment has benefitted from strong theory-building and methods, both of which have relatively quickly improved the understanding of attachment bonds in groups.

Similar to interpersonal attachment, working models and group-related goals form the social cognitive underpinnings of group

attachment. Rom and Mikulincer (2003) found that although anxiously attached group members seek security and love in groups but hold negative self-appraisals, avoidant group members seek distance and self-reliance in groups and hold negative appraisals of others. However, both anxious and avoidant attached group members report lower instrumental functioning in groups, and avoidant members also report lower socio-emotional functioning. Additionally, Rom and Mikulincer (2003) observed a moderating effect of group cohesion. Although high cohesion was a boon for group members high in group attachment anxiety (i.e., the negative effects are attenuated), it was a detriment to members high in group attachment avoidance (i.e., the negative effects are strengthened). This may be because cohesive groups exert pressure on group members to disclose more personal information, spend more time together, and generally become closer to one another, which people high in avoidant attachment are reluctant to do. In addition to cohesion, other situational or contextual variables that may temporarily induce group attachment include physical proximity, low relationship and process conflict, fair distribution of workload, high backup behavior, and equitable value placed on all team member contributions (Lee & Ling, 2007).

5.3 | Future research

Overall, the work that has been done in the area of attachment and group dynamics is promising. However, research on attachment dynamics in groups has focused almost exclusively on the positive outcomes of secure attachment. To further our understanding of group attachment, it would be useful to examine the possible adaptive functions of insecure attachment within groups. A few studies have revealed a positive relationship between attachment anxiety and individuals' accuracy in detecting deceit (Ein-Dor & Perry, 2014), their effectiveness in alerting group members to threat (Ein-Dor & Tal, 2012), and their sensitivity to threat (Ein-Dor, 2015). Scholars may also consider investigating optimal combinations of secure versus insecure group attachment among members. Could a team, for example, withstand higher heterogeneity in attachment if there are more securely than insecurely attached group members? It also remains unclear whether group attachment could be conceptualized as a group-level construct. Could attachment be aggregated to the group-level, and if so, how might it relate to outcomes such as task and interpersonal conflict?

Another interesting area for future research involves attachment in teams in which all members are not co-located. Bowlby (1979), for example, argued that physical proximity is a necessary function for secure attachment. However, technological advances have dramatically changed the landscape for how geographically dispersed group members may interact in the 30-plus years since Bowlby's proposition. This perspective is important when considering the distributed nature of contemporary work and the prevalence of virtual teams.

6 | ATTACHMENT AND THE EMPLOYEE-ORGANIZATION RELATIONSHIP

Attachment research in the context of the relationship between an employee and his/her employer follows one of two paths. First, much

of the research again centers on attachment styles and their effects on work-related outcomes. Second, an emerging area of research examines the organization as an attachment figure and target of attachment behaviors.

6.1 | Attachment style influences

The relationship between employees' attachment styles and work-related outcomes is among the most established application of attachment theory to the workplace. To this point, Harms's (2011) earlier review details numerous studies that have examined the relationship between employees' attachment styles and outcomes such as facet and general job satisfaction, work-family spillover, citizenship behaviors, and employee performance.

However, a number of studies have occurred after this previous review. Since 2011, for example, researchers have offered additional evidence that employees' attachment styles relate to reports of attitudinal constructs such as job satisfaction and/or work turnover intentions (Lopez & Ramos, 2016; Tziner et al., 2014). Associations between employees' attachment styles and organizational commitment have also been studied, with results suggesting that some attachment styles may relate differently to distinct commitment dimensions. For instance, in addition to a positive relationship between secure attachment and affective commitment, Scrima, Di Stefano, Guarnaccia, and Lorito (2015) found that avoidant attachment was negatively related to affective commitment but positively related to normative commitment. Recent research on attachment styles has also expanded to examine other outcomes. Using a sample of college students, for example, Schmidt (2016) found that those with insecure attachment styles tended to report higher levels of psychological contract breach. In addition, Koleva, Selterman, Iyer, Ditto, and Graham (2013) showed that anxiety and avoidant attachment styles may relate differently to individuals' moral judgments, with avoidant attachment having a more negative effect.

Researchers have additionally examined different mediating mechanisms linking employees' attachment styles and work-related outcomes. Towler and Stuhlmacher (2013), for instance, explored relational constructs in a sample of female employees and found evidence of an indirect effect between individuals' attachment styles and job satisfaction through leader-member exchange. The greatest emphasis on indirect effects, however, has been given to stress-related variables. One example is a study by Chopik (2015), who found a negative relationship between avoidant attachment and ethical decision making, but also evidence that this relationship may be mediated by emotional exhaustion. Researchers have similarly observed an association between individuals' attachment styles and related variables such as burnout and the adoption of specific coping strategies (Pines, 2004; Richards & Schat, 2011; Schirmer & Lopez, 2001).

Finally, beyond studies examining direct and indirect effects, a few researchers have begun to consider moderating effects for attachment styles. For example, Dahling and Librizzi (2015) found that the relationship between needs-supplies fit and job satisfaction was moderated by employees' avoidant attachment. Specifically, the positive relationship between fit and satisfaction became weaker for highly avoidant individuals. In another study conducted in Israel, an interactive effect

between avoidant attachment and autonomy emerged in predicting multiple outcomes, including engagement, burnout, emotional distress, and career commitment (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2013). Results showed that highly avoidant individuals experienced less desirable outcomes when in more autonomous environments.

6.2 | The organization as an attachment figure

Scholars have also applied attachment theory to understand the connection between a person and his/her organization. Similar to group-focused attachment research described above, these studies identify the organization itself as an attachment figure. Researchers have applied this lens in two key contexts—organizational change (Grady & Grady, 2013) and job loss (Albert et al., 2015). These studies follow the premise that because the organization serves as an attachment figure, significant changes in the context of employees' relationship with the organization would be expected to result in outcomes associated with the dissolution of any attachment-based relationship. Such outcomes include grief, emotional distress, and/or feelings of abandonment as the organization no longer offers a secure base for its members (Albert et al., 2015). From a practical standpoint, feelings stemming from a change in the attachment relationship can have implications for the potential success of large-scale strategic decisions involving change initiatives or organizational restructuring (Grady & Grady, 2013).

6.3 | Future research

Several avenues are available for future research connecting attachment perspectives to the employee-organization relationship. First, we encourage researchers interested in the effects of attachment styles to devote increased attention to attachment style as a moderating variable. A particularly interesting direction may be how the relationship between job characteristics (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2013) and/or flexible workplace practices and employee performance may differ for those with different attachment styles. For instance, although potential benefits for practices such as telecommuting exist, researchers could examine how telecommuting might be more stressful for individuals with higher attachment anxiety and needs for social affirmation.

Researchers may also wish to examine whether an employee's attachment style may lead to a different set of expectations for the employment relationship. Research from the social psychology literature, for example, has shown an association between anxious attachment and the need for social acceptance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Avoidant attachment has also been linked with greater levels of social dominance and lower levels of prosocial behavior (Hawley, Shorey, & Alderman, 2009). Either of these orientations could influence how people respond to various organizational circumstances, and especially large-scale changes. Finally, the greatest potential for advancement may be in the study of how secure attachment could be primed through workplace interventions. As this topic is relevant for multiple research domains, though, we return to it later in our general discussion of future research.

7 | ATTACHMENT MEASURES AND PRIMES

Attachment has traditionally been measured as a trait expressed in the context of caregiving relationships, though measures are easily adapted for use in the workplace. As indicated in Table 2, there are many options. Two of the earliest measures of adult attachment took a typological approach (three-category: Hazan & Shaver, 1987; four-category: Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), asking participants to select which (or to what extent) descriptions of each style best represented them. This typological approach, however, has largely been replaced by a dimensional approach (Richards & Schat, 2011). A dimensional approach emphasizes continuous dimensions over categorical styles. Early dimensional measures such as Collins and Read's (1990) Adult Attachment Scale and Simpson, Rholes, and Phillips' (1996) Adult Attachment Questionnaire were based on Hazan and Shaver's (1987) three-category descriptions. In contrast, the Experience in Close Relationships (ECR) scale, its more robust revised version (ECR-R), and a shortened version (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) measure only two dimensions—*anxiety* and *avoidance*—inferring secure attachment from low scores on each (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).

In an empirical comparison of each of these measures, Fraley et al. (2000) found that the ECR-R demonstrated the best psychometric properties. The ECR-R is also the most widely used measure of adult attachment (see Table 2). Unfortunately, for organizational researchers, however, the ECR-R contains items specific to the context of romantic relationships. For broader use, an adaptation of the ECR-R that replaces “romantic partners” with generic “others” called the Experience of Relationships Scale offers a valid substitute (Richards & Schat, 2011). Alternatively, Joplin, Nelson, and Quick's (1999) Self-Reliance Inventory measures continuous dimensions of interdependence, overdependence, and counterdependence and is adapted for the workplace.

Researchers interested in dimensions other than anxiety and avoidance may consider Feeney, Noller, and Hanrahan's (1994) Attachment Style Questionnaire, which assesses discomfort with closeness, need for approval, relationships as secondary, preoccupation with relationships, and confidence. Also, trained raters may conduct the Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1998). Relationship-specific rather than trait-based measures of attachment include the ECR-Relationship Structures Questionnaire (Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011) for individual attachment figures and the Social Group Attachment Scale (Smith et al., 1999) for group attachment figures.

Beyond style, secure base support (Feeney & Thrush, 2010) taps the extent to which a leader is available, provides encouragement, and refrains from interfering in employees' work. Similarly, supervisor security provision (Lavy, 2014) assesses the extent to which a supervisor provides acceptance, role modeling, friendship, criticism, and rejection.

As noted, attachment styles can also be primed, activating state attachment. Researchers have used several different priming mechanisms. For example, Mikulincer et al. (2002) developed a priming mechanism in which names of participants' attachment figures are paired with threatening words (e.g., failure, separation) and flashed on a screen. A second priming mechanism is a recall prime. Participants

are asked to visualize and write about a time when they interacted with someone in a way that resembles secure versus insecure attachment (Chugh et al., 2014), or simply to picture an attachment figure's face and imagine being with them (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996).

Selecting a measure will depend on the interests of the researcher. Due to their popularity and sound psychometric properties, in most cases, an adapted version of the ECR-R (Brennan et al., 1998), the ECR-Relationship Structures Questionnaire (Fraley et al., 2000), or the shortened ECR (Wei et al., 2007) will be sufficient. Additionally, more recent alternatives that do not require adaptation for the workplace may be preferable (e.g., Joplin et al., 1999; Richards & Schat, 2011). However, these newer measures have not withstood the level of psychometric scrutiny as the more well-established ECR. Researchers should take this into account when selecting between attachment scales.

8 | ADDITIONAL DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the sections above, we provided recommendations for future research on attachment dynamics in the areas of dyadic, group, and employee–organization relationships. Our systematic review of these research domains, along with our review of measures, makes clear that although attachment theory has had a meaningful impact on work-related research, the scope of its application remains somewhat limited. More specifically, most organizational attachment research continues to center on the effects attachment styles have on various outcomes. As we highlighted earlier, however, this represents only one component of attachment theory. In this section, therefore, we revisit the core assertions of attachment theory identified earlier (Table 1) and offer recommendations for future research that may advance our understanding of the activation of the attachment behavioral system, working models of attachment, the priming of attachment states, and the effects of felt security on autonomous behavior.

8.1 | Activation of the attachment behavioral system

The activation of the attachment behavioral system is a core tenant of attachment theory and yet the most neglected in organizational research. This is Bowlby's (1969) assertion that the attachment behavioral system is activated and salient during times of stress. Attachment theory provides detailed propositions about the attachment system and how it is activated and regulated, particularly in response to stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). This is especially relevant to pressing organizational concerns about burnout, mindfulness, and well-being. It is also relevant when considering organizational influences on attachment behavior, such as the influence of organizational culture and distressing events like large-scale organizational change. Given the array of stress-inducing events employees may face, the workplace provides a rich context for examining the activation and regulation of the attachment system.

TABLE 2 Core attachment measures and attachment primes

| Measure and citation | Dimensions | Method | Frequency | Average α (N) |
|---|--|------------------------|-----------|---|
| Adult attachment types (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (1 item) | 10 | — |
| Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close/secure • Depend/avoidant • Anxiety | Survey (18 items) | 2 | — |
| Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure • Dismissing • Preoccupied • Fearful | Survey (4 items) | 9 | — |
| Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeny et al., 1994) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence • Discomfort with closeness/avoidance • Relationships as secondary • Preoccupation with relationships/anxiety • Need for approval | Survey (40 items) | 3 | Anx. = .88 (3) |
| Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson et al., 1996) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (17 items) | 2 | — |
| Experiences in Close Relationships (Brennan et al., 1998) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (36 items) | 17 | Anx. = .89 (16) Avoid. = .87 (15) |
| Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Revised (Fraley et al., 2000) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (36 items) | 2 | Anx. = .95 (2) Avoid. = .95 (2) |
| Self-reliance Inventory (Joplin et al., 1999) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counterdependence • Interdependence • Overdependence | Survey (16 items) | 4 | Counter = .79 (3) Inter = .78 (4) Over = .78 (3) |
| Social Group Attachment Scale (Smith et al., 1999) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (25 items) | 1 | Gen. Group (1): Anx. = .86 Avoid. = .75 Spec. Group (1): Anx. = .91 Avoid. = .80 |
| Shortened ECR (ECR-short) (Wei et al., 2007) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (12 items) | 3 | Anx. = .77 (3) Avoid. = .84 (3) |
| Revised ECR—Relationship Structures Questionnaire (Fraley et al., 2011) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (9 items) | 0 | — |
| Experience of Relationships Survey (Richards & Schat, 2011) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Avoidance | Survey (36 items) | 2 | Anx. = .94 (3) Avoid. = .88 (3) |
| Secure base support (Feeny & Thrush, 2010; Wu & Parker, 2017) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability • Encouragement • Noninterference | Survey (9–15 items) | 1 | Availability = .90 (1) Encouragement = .80 (1) Noninterference = .88 (1) |
| Supervisor security provision (Lavy, 2014) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance • Role modeling • Friendship • Criticism • Rejection | Survey (41 items) | 0 | — |
| Adult attachment interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1998) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure-autonomous • Dismissing • Preoccupied • Unresolved | Interview | 1 | — |
| Lexical decision attachment prime (Mikulincer et al., 2002) | — | Prime | 1 | — |
| Visualization and writing attachment prime (Baldwin et al., 1996; Chugh et al., 2014) | — | Prime | 1 | — |

Note. Frequency indicates the number of papers in our review that have used this measure. A frequency of 0 indicates that this measure was not used beyond the paper that first introduced this measure. For average reliability, blanks represent instances where average values could not be calculated due to edits made to the original measure or where data were not available.

Anx. = anxiety; Avoid. = avoidance; ECR = Experience in Close Relationships.

We recommend that researchers consider how individuals' attachment systems may be both activated and regulated in organizational environments. This includes whether certain types of stress triggers result in individuals seeking refuge with a specific attachment figure, or lead individuals to sever ties with a perceived attachment figure. In addition, researchers could consider how individuals' attachment systems may relate to the concept of holding environments at work, which are also described as salient under the conditions of stressful organizational experiences (Kahn, 2001). There are many opportunities to further our understanding of these dynamics. One approach would be to focus on attachment processes in the context of stressful workplace events. For example, through an experience sampling design, researchers could examine the activation of attachment behaviors as stress-inducing events unfold at work.

8.2 | Working models of attachment

In our review, we found that organizational research largely assumes that attachment styles are stable and consistent across relationships (Harms, 2011). This assumption has been challenged, however, by longitudinal findings on changes in attachment styles (Fraley, 2002). As Collins (1996) notes, "representations of self and others continue to evolve as individuals encounter new relationships throughout their lives" (p. 811). More specifically, Arriaga, Kumashiro, Finkel, VanderDrift, and Luchies (2014) found that a person's attachment anxiety can decrease over time in a relationship with a trusted partner. In addition, the authors found that attachment avoidance can also decrease over time through goal validation from one's partner.

Recent advances in attachment research have established that attachment representations are relationship-specific (Baldwin et al., 1996). For example, Cozzarelli, Hoekstra, and Bylsma (2000) found that measures of relationship-specific attachment were better predictors of relationship satisfaction than a person's general attachment style. Such distinctions have not been made in research on work relationships. Accordingly, we suggest that the assumption of stable attachment styles needs to be examined through research on relationship-specific attachment as well as changes in attachment styles over time. More specifically, we recommend the use of network analysis and longitudinal methods to advance knowledge on relationship-specific changes in attachment representations over time. In addition, the extension of attachment theory to network research could advance the understanding of network phenomenon such as developmental networks (Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2012), trust across multiple relationships (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012), and the effects of network position on personality expression (Landis, 2016).

8.3 | Priming of attachment states

Research on attachment states has advanced through the use of attachment primes. The priming of attachment states has informed research in social psychology (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and has implications for outcomes such as prosocial behaviors, intergroup relations, and individual well-being. Several straightforward yet reliable procedures for priming secure attachment also exist (see Section 7). However, studies to date have mostly occurred in lab settings. An

important area for future research concerns attachment primes in specific organizational interventions. Could organizational training programs benefit from the inclusion of secure attachment primes, and even those as simple as recall-based processes used currently in the lab? Researchers could examine this question in a variety of contexts, such as diversity training programs, newcomer socialization programs, or formal mentoring programs.

8.4 | Felt security and autonomous behavior

Finally, attachment theory provides an important lens into how feelings of felt security can result in autonomous motivation and creative problem solving. With few exceptions (e.g., Kahn, 1995; Wu & Parker, 2017), this dynamic has received little attention in organizational research. We thus recommend further research on the effects of secure attachment on outcomes related to autonomous functioning, such as creativity, proactivity, and self-management. In particular, the dependency paradox—where support results in greater levels of autonomy—provides an untested perspective to understand the links between support characteristics and individual outcomes such as creativity and proactivity. At the group and organizational levels, further research is also needed to understand how people experience felt security in the context of multiple relationships, groups, as well as in their relationships with organizations.

9 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The research and future directions proposed in this review have several practical implications for organizations. First, research on attachment theory is centrally concerned with how and why people establish, develop, and sustain relationships with others—a dynamic that is fundamental to the development of social capital and the success of organizations. It also provides a distinct psychological and developmental perspective to work relationships. For example, research by Wu and Parker (2017) revealed that secure base support from leaders can facilitate greater levels of proactivity in followers—a dynamic that is explained by the fulfillment of attachment needs and not a transactional exchange. The salience of attachment needs and its consequences is an important and practical perspective for leaders in organizations.

Second, the centrality of attachment dynamics to leadership suggests a need for more attachment-informed leadership interventions, particularly around coaching and leader development. Among potential applications, we recommend the use of secure attachment primes in the form of visual or conversation-based interventions. For example, Chugh et al. (2014) found that the recollection of a secure relationship was an effective intervention to prevent moral disengagement in ethically challenging situations. The authors suggest this intervention could be replicated in practical settings using visual interventions (e.g., photographs or desktop screen savers) to remind employees of secure relationships. In the context of leadership, leaders could model secure base attachment behaviors as well as create work environments where secure attachment relationships are encouraged and celebrated.

Finally, attachment theory has practical implications for job design and organizational support. Avoidant individuals are less likely to seek out social support (Richards & Schat, 2011) and are more likely to experience burnout when they have high levels of autonomy (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2013). In addition, anxiously attached individuals place more value on collaboration and security in their work environments (Pines, 2004). This suggests that anxious and avoidant individuals may benefit from interdependent roles. Work environments that are structured to promote interdependence may allow avoidant individuals to receive social support without actively seeking it out and provide anxious individuals an increased sense of belonging.

10 | CONCLUSION

This review examines the breadth of attachment theory's contribution to organizational behavior. More specifically, we examine attachment dynamics in three core areas of research: dyadic relationships, group dynamics, and the employee-organization relationship. Our review reveals how attachment relationships are central to organizational life. Employees seek stable and secure relationships with other people at work, with groups, and with the organizations for which they work. This is firmly rooted in the fundamental human needs for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and security in relationships with others (Bowlby, 1979). Across these domains, attachment theory provides a unique perspective to understand relational influences on individual and organizational outcomes.

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