



The impact of adult attachment style on organizational commitment and adult attachment in the workplace



Fabrizio Scrima^{a,*}, Giovanni Di Stefano^b, Cinzia Guarnaccia^b, Lucrezia Lorito^c

^a *Université Rennes 2, Département de Psychologie, France*

^b *Università degli Studi di Palermo, Dipartimento di Scienze Psicologiche, Pedagogiche e della Formazione, 90128, Viale delle Scienze, Ed. 15, Italy*

^c *ASL di Monza e Brianza, Italy*

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ABSTRACT

Adult attachment style has only recently been considered as having a role in explaining work behavior. The present research aimed to explore the impact of adult attachment style, assessed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), on organizational commitment (OC) and on adult attachment in the workplace (AAW). We hypothesized that a secure attachment style would be positively related to affective and normative commitment, while preoccupied and avoidant styles would be negatively related to affective commitment; we also hypothesized that there would be a correspondence between the AAI categories and the AAW dimensions. Using the AAI categories as group variable, analysis of average OC and AAW scores confirmed the hypotheses. Secure workers had a higher mean score for affective commitment than avoidant and preoccupied workers; normative commitment was higher in avoidant than in secure and preoccupied workers; continuance commitment was higher in preoccupied than in secure and avoidant workers. Moreover, AAI categories converged with AAW dimensions: secure workers had higher secure AAW scores than avoidant and preoccupied workers; avoidant workers had higher avoidant AAW scores than secure and preoccupied workers; preoccupied workers had higher preoccupied AAW scores than secure and avoidant workers.

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1. Introduction

Research on the personality determinants of organizational behavior and attitudes as organizational commitment, has a long history (e.g., Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnysky, 2002), and personality traits and individual differences are considered to be influencing factors with respect to the variables most closely related to the organization. However, the impact of individual factors on organizational behavior is still a source of debate among researchers. For instance, in their influential article, Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1989) deemed personality effects on organizational behavior to be more illusory than real, concluding that “dispositions are likely to have only limited effects on attitudes and behavior inside organizations” (p. 396). On the other hand, a close relationship has been found between personality traits and different work behaviors (e.g., De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001).

In the last 15 years, adult attachment style has been considered to play a primary role in work behavior, and attachment theory has been shown to account for variance in organizational variables above that

of other personality traits (Neustadt, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2011; Richards & Schat, 2011). In fact, empirical data suggest that attachment style (secure, preoccupied, or avoidant), being relatively stable from childhood to adulthood (Berlin & Cassidy, 2002; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994), is involved in interpersonal experiences (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 1997, 2000) as well as in the quality of work relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Moreover, attachment theory suggests that individuals with different attachment styles differ in terms of boundary maintenance between self and other (Cassidy & Belsky, 1994; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994), as confirmed by differences in attachment patterns in different life contexts. Consequently, adults with different internal working models differ in their retrospective perceptions of interpersonal and emotional experiences and in their views of self and other (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 1997). So, adult attachment style may be readily extendable to the workplace domain as well, and serve as a possible determinant of employee interrelating attitudes and behaviors.

This paper aims to investigate the impact of adult attachment style on organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990) and attachment in the workplace (Neustadt, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2006; Neustadt, Furnham, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2006; Scrima, 2015), using the Adult Attachment Interview (Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2002) to assess attachment styles.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: fabrizioscrima@hotmail.com (F. Scrima), giovanni.distefano@unipa.it (G. Di Stefano), lucrezialorito@libero.it (L. Lorito).

2. Evaluating the impact of adult attachment style on organizational commitment and adult attachment in the workplace with the Adult Attachment Interview

Recently, renewed attention has been given to attachment theory to explore the impact of attachment style on organizational life, and several researchers (e.g., Richards & Schat, 2011; Scrima, 2014) have shown a relationship between attachment style and relevant organizational attitudes, such as organizational commitment and the quality of the relationships between colleagues.

However, researchers in organizational settings have mostly used self-report measures of adult attachment. The main criticism of these measures is that they examine conscious attitudes to close relationships and thus do not take into account any response bias; also, self-report questionnaires have been criticized for not detecting attachment patterns that can only be expressed once they have been activated (Ravitz, Maunder, Hunter, Sthankiya, & Lancee, 2010). Interview methods can reduce response distortions and increase attachment activation while focusing on close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bifulco, Mahon, Kwon, Moran, & Jacobs, 2003).

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main et al., 2002) is probably the most influential instrument for evaluating attachment at the level of representation (Hesse, 2008). It enables inferences to be made about attachment in adults, based on the quality of descriptions of relationships with important adults in childhood. The AAI views attachment from a developmental perspective, seeing attachment as a life-span concept that is relatively stable over time (Berman & Sperling, 1994).

Empirical data suggest that attachment style is relatively stable from childhood to adulthood (Berlin & Cassidy, 2002; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Furthermore, Pietromonaco and Feldman Barrett (1997, 2000), investigating the link between attachment style and everyday social interactions, found that coexistent multiple attachment models correlate with interactions and contexts relevant for attachment and, and that attachment style can be determined by intimacy and affectivity in interpersonal relationships (Laurenceau, Pietromonaco, & Feldman Barrett, 1998). In particular, through the AAI, it is possible to assess attachment phenomena that do not rely on conscious self-evaluation, emphasizing a person's ability to reflect on his/her inner world and the perceived intentions or subjective experiences of others and of her/his context, including organizational settings (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

3. The relation between adult attachment style and organizational commitment

Allen and Meyer (1990) suggested that organizational commitment is a psychological state that has three components: affective, normative and continuance. Affective commitment refers to an individual's identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to an organization; normative commitment reflects a feeling of loyalty toward the organization based on a perceived obligation to be loyal; and continuance commitment is a tendency to maintain one's membership of the organization based on recognition of the costs associated with departure (Allen & Meyer, 1996). Commitment to organization is experienced as a psychological state that binds employee toward a particular course of action (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) that reflects her/his affective connection with the organization, although that which constitutes the basis for such attachment is still under debate in organizational research (Meyer et al., 2002). In particular, research on organizational commitment has not focused specifically on the underlying dimensions of psychological attachment to the organization. Secure attachment in AAI is likely to be associated with the acquisition and use of self-regulatory and interpersonal skills (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). If so, security is likely to be associated with positive experiences in organizations and positive attitudes toward them. By contrast, insecure employees, who lack self-regulation, interpersonal coordination, and

prosocial orientation, can have problems committing themselves to an organization and engaging in productive organizational behavior. Consistent with these arguments, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) found that insecure attachment orientations (both avoidance and anxiety) were correlated with lower levels of organizational commitment, prosocial action, and spontaneous productive behaviors.

Richards and Schat (2011) have explicitly investigated the relationship between affective commitment and adult attachment style. They found a negative relationship between affective commitment and avoidant and preoccupied styles. Their paper, despite having considerable impact in the scientific community, analyzes attachment style using the ECR (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), which only takes into account the two insecure attachment styles. Recently, Scrima (2014) showed that a secure attachment style is positively correlated with the affective and normative components of commitment, and that preoccupied and avoidant attachment styles are negatively correlated with affective commitment.

As Hazan and Shaver (1990) argued, secure attachment is likely to promote effective workplace behavior, marked by a sense of confidence and by positive relationships with coworkers; hence, this attachment style may be related to the affective dimension of organizational commitment, which refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in an organization.

Also, attachment theory highlights the link between attachment anxiety and negative working models of self; that is, preoccupied individuals tend to perceive the self as unworthy and inadequate, leading to an obsessive need for assurance from others, overdependence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005), and hyper-vigilance to social and emotional cues from others (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006). So, we may argue that preoccupied individual can be committed to an organization because she/he perceives a high cost of losing organizational membership.

At last, attachment avoidance is linked to negative working models of others; that is, to the tendency to perceive others as unavailable and untrustworthy. Individuals characterized by avoidant attachment view others as unavailable, unresponsive, or punishing (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005, 2007). So, they are likely to suppress or inhibit the affective experience of being committed to; at least they will feel they ought to do so (normative commitment), but she or he will not feel affectively committed to their organization.

In accordance, the following hypotheses were formulated regarding differences for employees' commitment to their organization across secure, avoidant and preoccupied attachment style assessed by AAI.

H1a. Affective commitment is higher among the secure as compared with the avoidant and preoccupied attachment style;

H1b. Normative commitment is higher among the avoidant as compared with the secure and preoccupied attachment style;

H1c. Continuance commitment is higher among the preoccupied as compared with the avoidant and secure attachment style.

4. The relation between adult attachment style and adult attachment in the workplace

In the working environment, Hazan and Shaver (1990) argued that people seek the maintenance of proximity. In particular, adults with a secure attachment style assess their relationships in the workplace positively and have few work-related fears. Conversely, preoccupied people have a strong interest in maintaining proximity with co-workers and express a significant fear of rejection due to poor performance, suggesting that admiration and acceptance are the main reasons that drive their work behavior. Finally, adults with an avoidant attachment style use work to avoid social interactions and, although showing mean job

satisfaction scores, they appear to be less satisfied than their secure colleagues.

Adult attachment in the workplace (AAW: Neustadt, Chamorro-Premuzic, et al., 2006; Neustadt, Furnham, et al., 2006) looks at the quality of employees' relations in the workplace from the perspective of attachment theory. The AAW scale is a self-report measure that assesses adult attachment in the workplace, and is adapted from the romantic attachment scale developed by Collins and Read (1990). The original version of the scale identifies two related factors: Insecure Attachment at Work, and Secure/Autonomous Attachment at Work. Recently, Scrima, Rioux, and Lorito (2014), using confirmatory factor analysis, found a three-factor structure of the AAW scale (secure, avoidant, preoccupied). However, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies in the literature that have explicitly investigated the relationship between AAW and adult attachment style.

Interactions with responsive others promote the formation of attachment security, characterized by comfort with closeness and interdependence (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Conversely, inconsistent caregiver responsiveness produces attachment anxiety, which is characterized by a preoccupation with attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), a strong need for closeness, worries about relationships, and fear of rejection (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). Consistent caregiver unresponsiveness produces attachment avoidance, which is characterized by preference for emotional distance from others (Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996).

Based on these tenets, we hypothesize:

H2a. Secure AAW is higher among the secure attachment compared to insecure attachment individuals;

H2b. Preoccupied AAW is higher among the preoccupied attachment compared to secure and avoidant attachment individuals;

H2c. Avoidant AAW is higher among the avoidant attachment compared to secure and preoccupied attachment individuals.

5. Method

5.1. Sample

The sample comprised individuals from a broad range of organizations. Potential participants were garnered from lists of alumni from two universities in southern Italy. To qualify for inclusion in our study, participants needed to work full-time and be willing to evaluate their perceived values regarding their workplace attachment. A total of 100 employees were contacted, with a response rate of 80%. The final sample thus comprised 80 working adults who took part in this research voluntarily, all participants were of Caucasian origin. Average age was 39 years ($SD = 10.34$); 60% were men and 40% were women. They were employed by medium and large organizations, 55% in the public sector and 45% in the private sector and they included executives (36%), office workers (30%), and blue-collar workers (34%). Average tenure was 12.37 years ($SD = 8.42$).

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Adult attachment style

The AAI (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984; Main et al., 2002) was used to assess attachment style. It is composed of 20 questions and takes an average of 60 min to complete. Participants were asked to give an overview of their childhood relationships with their parents and to provide sets of five adjectives describing their childhood relationship with each parent. They were then invited to cite incidents or experiences from childhood that could illustrate or explain the choice of each adjective. Next, feelings of rejection, experiences of being upset, ill or hurt, separations, losses, and abuse were investigated. Participants were also

encouraged to discuss changes in their relationships with their parents since childhood, to describe their current relationships with them, and to explain their understanding of their parents' behavior. Finally, they were asked to consider the effects of early childhood experiences on their adult personality and parenting, as well as concerns and hopes for their children.

The AAI coding system involves the use of a set of continuous rating scales to inductively sort participants into attachment typologies; 9-point scales are used to rate the participant's tendency to idealize childhood experiences with caregivers (*mother idealization* and *father idealization*), the inability to access memories from childhood (*lack of memory*), the extent to which one or both caregivers are derogated (*derogation*), the expression of irrational fears that their child may die (*fear of loss*), current active anger toward parents (*mother anger* and *father anger*), and passive or incoherent attachment-related narratives (*passivity*).

5.2.2. Organizational commitment

The Organizational Commitment Scale (OCS: Allen & Meyer, 1990) in its Italian version (Pierro, Lombardo, Fabbri, & Di Spirito, 1995) was used to measure the three components of commitment. The scale consists of 18 items (e.g.: "I do not feel part of the great family which is my organization") with a five-point Likert type response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In this study, reliability coefficients were .89 for affective commitment, .85 for normative commitment, and .70 for continuance commitment, with 53.59% of total variance explained.

5.2.3. Attachment in the workplace

The Italian version of the AAW scale (Neustadt, Chamorro-Premuzic, et al., 2006; Neustadt, Furnham, et al., 2006; Scrima et al., 2014) was used to measure attachment style in the workplace. This measure consists of 18 items with a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale has a three-factor structure: secure, avoidant and preoccupied attachment styles (e.g.: "I find it relatively easy to get close to others at work", "I want to be completely in tune with my boss", "I often worry that my colleagues do not really trust me"). The two insecure dimensions are negatively correlated with the secure attachment dimension (Scrima et al., 2014). In this study reliability coefficients were .72 for preoccupied style, .71 for avoidant style, and .72 for secure style, with 54.93% of total variance explained.

5.3. Procedure

First, we administered the AAI individually, with an average of 63 min per interview (range: 42–78 min). The interviews were audio-taped, and the verbatim transcripts were rated on 15 9-point scales measuring adult attachment style. Next, we assigned an attachment category to each interview. Two expert coders carried out the coding and we applied Cohen's kappa index (Landis & Koch, 1977) to appraise the reliability of coding. Inter-rater agreement was calculated, and data revealed a high level of agreement between judges ($\alpha = .85$), with 82% of agreement over the three classifications (secure, avoidant and preoccupied). Disagreements between coders were settled through discussion. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire composed of the OCS and AAW.

5.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated in terms of mean, standard deviation, and zero-order correlations between variables. The reliability of each scale was assessed with Cronbach's alpha index of internal consistency.

To test the research hypotheses and compare average OCS and AAW scores, given the small sample size, we used the Kruskal–Wallis test and

paired comparison between attachment styles using the independent sample-test with Cohen's *d* calculation.

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive statistics

According to the AAI criteria, 53 participants (66%) were classified as “Secure”, 16 (20%) as “Avoidant”, and the remaining 11 (14%) as “Preoccupied”. A meta-analysis by van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1996) examined 33 AAW studies and concluded that the worldwide frequency of the three traditional attachment styles was as follows: 58% secure, 24% avoidant/dismissing, and 18% anxious/preoccupied. These data align well with previous research (Lorito & Scrima, 2011) with a sample of Italian employees.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of dependent variables. Skewness and kurtosis range between -1.00 and 1.00, confirming the monovariate normality of distribution. The Mardia index (64.32 < 80) also shows multivariate normality of distribution.

Table 2 shows that only continuance commitment is not correlated with the other variables. Affective commitment is positively correlated with normative commitment ($r = .432, p = .001$) and secure attachment in the workplace ($r = .517, p = .001$) and negatively correlated with avoidant attachment in the workplace ($r = .333, p = .003$) and preoccupied attachment in the workplace ($r = -.342, p = .003$). Finally, secure attachment in the workplace is negatively correlated with avoidant attachment ($r = -.327, p = .003$), but not with preoccupied attachment in the workplace ($r = .212, p = .057$).

To compare mean OCS and AAW scores, the Kruskal–Wallis test was used and Cohen's *d* effect size was calculated. Analysis shows statistically significant differences for all three OCS dimensions and for the three attachment styles measured by the AAW (see Table 3). Secure employees had the highest scores for affective commitment ($M = 4.16$), avoidant workers had the highest scores for normative commitment ($M = 4.40$), while those with a preoccupied style had the highest scores for continuance commitment ($M = 3.90$).

Moreover, with regard to the scores obtained on the AAW scale, there is a correspondence between attachment style identified by the AAI and attachment style in the workplace.

Finally, Table 4 shows paired comparisons between the attachment styles identified by the AAI. This test, comparable to a post-hoc test, confirms the results of the Kruskal–Wallis test. First, workers with a secure attachment style show a higher mean score for affective commitment than those with avoidant ($d = 1.01$) and preoccupied attachment styles ($d = 1.23$). Normative commitment is higher in people with preoccupied attachment style than in secure workers ($d = .94$) and moderately higher than in those with an avoidant style ($d = .66$) Finally, continuance commitment is higher in people with avoidant attachment style than in those with a preoccupied style ($d = 1.36$) and moderately higher than those with a secure style ($d = .83$).

With regard to the differences in the AAW scores in relation to the AAI, results indicate that there is a perfect convergence between adult attachment styles and the AAW. More specifically, workers with a secure style had higher scores for secure attachment in the workplace than those with avoidant ($d = 1.02$) and preoccupied styles ($d =$

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of organizational commitment and attachment in the workplace.

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Affective commitment	3.694	.735	-.331	-.735
Normative commitment	2.637	.874	.468	-.819
Continuance commitment	3.258	.983	.457	-.949
AAW – secure	3.633	.602	-.201	-.808
AAW – avoidant	2.764	.763	.611	-.712
AAW – preoccupied	2.070	.701	.685	-.623

Note: AAW: adult attachment in the workplace.

Table 2
Zero-order correlation between variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Affective commitment	1				
2 Normative commitment	.432*	1			
3 Continuance commitment	.083	.079	1		
4 AAW – secure	.517*	.298*	.112	1	
5 AAW – avoidant	-.333*	.327*	.018	-.320*	1
6 AAW – preoccupied	-.342*	.212	.079	-.336*	.324*

Note: AAW: adult attachment in the workplace.

* $p < .05$.

1.27). Employees with an avoidant style had higher scores for avoidant attachment in the workplace than those who are secure ($d = 1.11$) and preoccupied ($d = 1.55$). Finally, people with a preoccupied style had higher scores for preoccupied attachment in the workplace than those who are secure ($d = .94$) and avoidant ($d = 1.11$).

7. Discussion

The aim of present study was to verify the effect of different adult attachment styles on organizational commitment and attachment in the workplace. Attachment style seems to determine different ways of experiencing relationships at work (Richards & Schat, 2011) and also influences the symbolic attachment between the individual and the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1996). Thus, adult attachment style can help understand the way people become attached to their organization and their attachment style in the workplace.

The results indicate that attachment style is a personality variable that determines the bond between individuals and the work context. People working in the same team or organization usually show different levels of affective, normative, and continuance commitment.

Our first hypothesis (H1a, H1b and H1c) was that employees with different adult attachment styles would show different levels in the three components of organizational commitment. Our results indicate first that people with a secure attachment style have high scores for the affective dimension of commitment. According to Hazan and Shaver (1990), secure subjects show more positive attitudes to their jobs. This may explain their tendency to develop an affective bond with their organization. Secondly, we found that people with a preoccupied attachment style have high scores for continuance commitment. This dimension applies to people whose bond with the organization is based on fear of not finding anything better or that their lives may suffer severe changes (Allen & Meyer, 1990). According to Hazan and Shaver (1990), preoccupied subjects show attitudes of fear in relationships and are afraid of being rejected by their colleagues. Fearful thoughts toward relationships could extend to society in general, which could

Table 3
Results of the comparison of average scores using the Kruskal–Wallis test.

	Adult attachment interview						Chi ²	df	Sig
	Secure (N = 53)		Avoidant (N = 16)		Preoccupied (N = 11)				
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
OCS									
- Affective	4.161	.622	2.982	.922	2.483	1.011	9.57	2	.01
- Normative	2.182	.961	4.401	.584	2.267	.882	14.21	2	.001
- Continuance	3.101	1.120	3.334	.716	3.909	.713	8.38	2	.05
AAW									
- Secure	4.153	.512	2.764	.812	2.398	.733	13.83	2	.001
- Avoidant	2.597	.764	3.725	.949	2.171	.492	9.61	2	.01
- Preoccupied	1.853	.734	2.000	.588	3.220	.706	9.24	2	.01

Note: OCS = Organizational Commitment Scale; AAW = adult attachment in the workplace.

Table 4
Paired sample comparisons using K independent sample test.

	(Secure vs. preoccupied)			(Secure vs. avoidant)			(Avoidant vs. preoccupied)		
	t	df	d	t	df	d	t	df	d
OCS									
– Affective	3.52**	67	1.01	3.72**	62	1.23	.05	25	.02
– Normative	–1.68	67	.48	–2.83**	62	.94	1.68*	25	.66
– Continuance	–2.90**	67	.83	1.12	62	.37	–3.47**	25	1.36
AAW									
– Secure	3.57**	67	1.02	3.82**	62	1.27	.07	25	.03
– Avoidant	–3.90**	67	1.11	1.37	62	.45	3.96**	25	1.55
– Preoccupied	.08	67	.02	–2.85**	62	.94	–2.84**	25	1.11

Note: OCS = Organizational Commitment Scale; AAW = adult attachment in the workplace. With regard to Cohen's d computation, pooled SD was used.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

explain why these people have the highest scores for the dimension of continuance commitment.

We also hypothesized that different attachment styles would affect workers' attachment to their workplace (H2a, H2b and H2c). Our result show an almost perfect match between AAI styles and AAW dimensions: secure subjects tend to perceive positive relationships in their workplace and worry less about their job; conversely, preoccupied employees express a significant fear of rejection and a belief that their colleagues do not trust them; finally, adults with an avoidant attachment style feel uncomfortable with the idea of being dependent on their colleagues. A worker can seek closeness to his/her organization and use his/her working team as a source of comfort, support, and safety in times of need. These findings suggest that insecure attachment styles interfere with organizational involvement: for example, Krausz, Bizman, and Braslavsky (2001) found that less secure workers were more likely to prefer external contracts (being hired and paid by an external agency) rather than having a more stable relationship with their organization (being directly hired and paid by their organization).

Although the present study provides evidence of the impact of adult attachment style on organizational commitment and AAW, some limitations need to be noted, in particular sample size and demographic characteristics. The results need to be interpreted with caution, and no causal inferences should be made. Therefore, future research should test the model using a more representative sample. This limitation is due to the use of the AAI, which required considerable effort by researchers compared to a simple self-report instrument.

A second limitation is the use of non-parametric tests to identify the impact of attachment style on organizational commitment. This limitation could be overcome in future research by increasing the sample size and testing the assumptions of normality required by parametric tests.

From an applied perspective, knowing the employees' adult attachment style could help deduce employees' organizational commitment, and could thus provide a useful indicator for human resource (HR) managers, who are responsible for reducing turnover's employees and improving performance. For example, since avoidant attachment could indicate a high level of continuance commitment and low performance (Meyer et al., 2002) HR managers should be vigilant and set up support procedures for these workers to prevent them developing strategies to change adult attachment patterns.

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