

# Attachment Theory Shaping Adult Development: Impact on Mentoring Experiences

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**Abstract:** Mentoring is increasingly used for career and psychosocial development. Very few studies that have investigated the role of individual differences in mentoring relationships have addressed the attachment styles of mentors and protégés. The purpose of this study is to find the connections between attachment styles, adult development, and mentoring experiences.

The most common source of our differences is what might be called “mindsets,” or filters through which people view the world, self and others (Rhinesmith, 1992). Connections between adult life experiences, learning, and development pervade the adult learning literature. However, not many studies have explored the relationship between early life attachment experiences and adult development. Attachment theory is concerned with the nature of close emotional bonds or attachments and how these unique relationships affect the life course (Bowlby, 1988). The literature on work and psychosocial development suggests that certain adult developmental outcomes play key roles in buffering against stress by engaging in interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Both academics and practitioners have recognized that interpersonal relationships such as mentoring are valuable because of their impact upon employee performance. Noe (2002) states that mentoring involves interactions with a more experienced person who serves as a facilitator of the protégé’s exploration of his or her social and work environment and as a source of support to cope with the stress of adjusting to a new situation. Despite some functional similarities between mentoring and attachment relationships, not much research has explored the relationship between the two (Noe, 2002). The role of certain adult developmental outcomes as mediator between attachment security and mentoring may be investigated in light of research tying attachment security to empathy, self-disclosure, and conflict resolution skills. This analysis views adult development and its impact on mentoring experiences within the framework of attachment theory. It addresses adult developmental outcomes in the context of adult attachment styles. The purpose of conducting this review was to explore how the literature of the fields that guide adult education (AE) and human resource development (HRD) treats the phenomenon of adult development and mentoring within the framework of attachment theory and to identify the implications for research and practice.

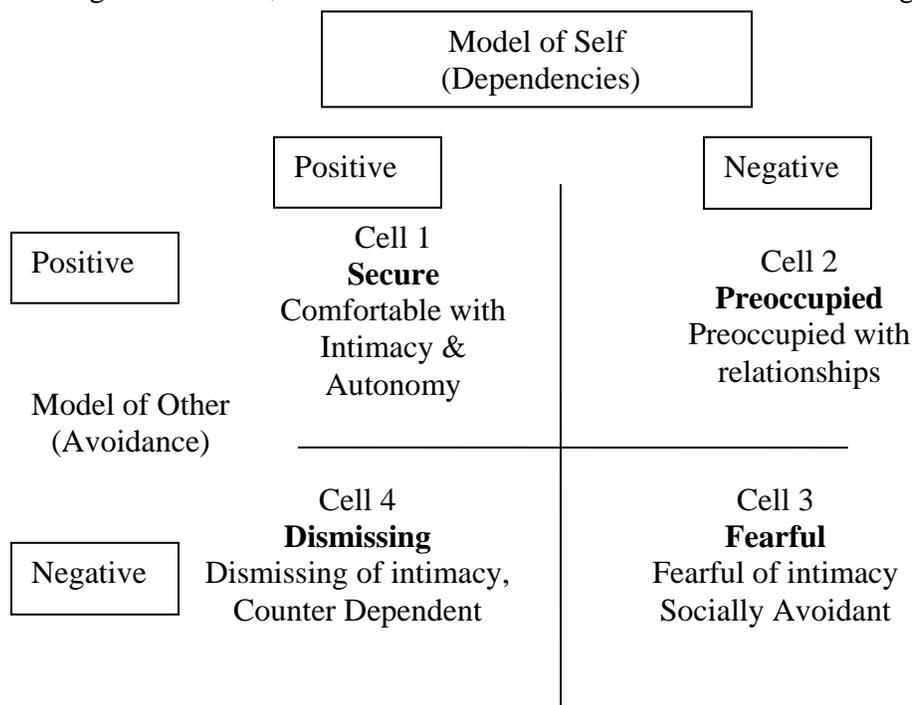
## Method

An initial search for the relevant literature was conducted by going through educational (ERIC, ECO, Education Full Text and PsycFirst), business (ABI Inform and Academic Universe) and psychology (PsycArticles and PsycINFO) databases with the general keywords “adult development,” “mentoring” and “attachment theory.” I chose these keywords since I was doing a general search. I narrowed down the large number of hits by using appropriate descriptors that came about from reading the abstracts of the articles that I found in the initial search, that were relevant to the purpose statement. Since not much relevancy was found in the journal articles, I continued the search in Dissertation Abstracts where I was successful in locating some that were relevant to the purpose of this study. Four themes in my findings were classified as attachment styles; attachment styles and adult developmental outcomes; work, psychosocial development, and attachment styles; and individual differences in mentoring.

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## Attachment Styles

Three major disciplines of psychology, economics, and systems theory form the foundations of the HRD literature (Yang, 2004). Attachment theory belongs to the field of psychology and one of its basic tenets is that an individual's early attachment experiences are progressively internalized through the development of internal working models of attachment. These working models are mental representations of the self and others, which guide perception, emotion regulation and information processing in close relationships. The quality of early relationships shape human beings' self-images of competence and lovability, and their general expectations about the trustworthiness and dependability of others to provide assistance in times of need. Once formed, both secure and insecure attachment orientations would be relatively stable and enduring (Bowlby, 1988). Although longitudinal studies of attachment verify that attachment relationships from early life carry over to adulthood (Cloninger, 2004), investigators have only recently examined the relationship between working models of attachment and social and emotional adaptation in adults. Bartholemew and Horowitz (1991) described the four prototypic forms of adult attachment styles: Secure, Preoccupied, Dismissing, and Fearful. Out of the four, secure adults have a sense of worthiness plus an expectation that other people are generally accepting and responsive to their support seeking endeavors. Preoccupied adults have low self-esteem and high regard for others, dismissing adults have high self-esteem and low regard for others, and fearful adults have low self-esteem and low regard for others.



### Attachment Styles and Adult Developmental Outcomes

Literature in adult development abounds in the definition of self or identity, maturity, personal agency and internal locus of control. Identity formation involves acquiring the sense of self that adults need and work is important for identity or self-definition. According to Freud (1961), a "mature" adult has the capacity to work and to love. Most studies of how people learn to work and to love are from the perspectives of developmental psychology. This is because learning to work and to love is a process that happens over time. The concepts of attachment and separation that depict the

nature and sequence of infant development appears in adolescence as identity and intimacy and in adulthood as love and work (Gilligan, 1982). According to White (1985), higher levels of ego development went together with emotional interdependence and granting of appropriate autonomy to others as well as to the self. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that attachments to others facilitate autonomous behavior. Knowles (1980) asserts that maturation involves moving from dependence to autonomy. This dimension of maturation that is labeled as “personal agency” by Merriam and Yang (1996) has been linked to internal locus of control by Cochran and Laub (1994). A person with a greater sense of agency would have an internal locus of control – a belief that one has some control over one’s life which helps one in seeking appropriate avenues to buffer against stress. Individuals with secure attachment styles know that acknowledgement of stress elicits supportive responses from others and turning to them is an effective route to enhanced coping. With confidence that support is available when needed, secure individuals can engage in autonomy-producing activities (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003).

### **Work, Psychosocial Development, and Attachment Styles**

The relationship between one’s work and psychosocial development has been documented by many psychologists and educators (as cited in Merriam & Yang, 1996, p. 77). Literature in human psychology suggests that the person’s selfhood forms the very core, monitoring his or her cognitive, emotive and behavioral aspects, internal relationships and interactions with others. Billett, Barker, and Hernon-Tinning (2002) reported that an individual with greater sense of personal agency exercises it to the fullest in a stressful work environment. “The sense of having a secure base provides an individual with a framework for maintaining well-being, formulating effective emotional-regulation devices, developing positive models of the self and others, and engaging in exploration and risk-taking” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001, p. 97). Securely attached employees are seen as more resilient (Klohn & Bera, 1998), and cope with stress more adaptively than those with insecure styles (Caldwell, 1995). Avoidant adults’ lower use of collaborative conflict resolution styles is related to lower levels of perspective-taking and lower social self-efficacy than secure adults (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). The preoccupied and fearful adults are the least satisfied with work relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1990) and more likely to use defensive coping strategies (Kummel, 1999). In childhood and adolescence, attachment style has been linked to ego development (Engels et al., 2001), social competence (Rice, Cunningham, & Young, 1997) and concern for others’ welfare (Eberly & Montemayer, 1999). These seem likely precursors of adult relationship competence, emotional intelligence and even of transformational leadership.

### **Individual Differences in Mentoring**

Mentoring has been defined as an intense interpersonal exchange between a more senior, experienced, and knowledgeable employee (mentor) who provides advice, counsel, feedback and support related to career and personal development of less experienced employees (protégés) (as cited in Noe et al., 2002, p. 130). Mentors traditionally serve two functions: career function and psychosocial function. From psychosocial functions, protégés benefit by receiving acceptance, counseling, and friendship. Psychosocial functions provide emotional support to the protégés, and help build their confidence and feelings of self-worth. Researchers have proposed that both mentors’ and protégé’s personal characteristics are key to understanding mentoring effectiveness. Effective mentors are characterized by personal characteristics such as friendliness and flexibility (Theophilides & Terenzini, 1981), accessibility and availability (Wilson, Woods, & Gaff, 1974), and empathy and respect (Chang, 1981). Protégés with internal locus of control, high self-monitoring, and high emotional stability seek out mentoring relationships because they believe they can benefit by seeking support from others through developmental activities. Individuals with low self-esteem

and low self-efficacy tend to withdraw from mentoring relationships because they feel threatened by challenges and are less likely to seek feedback (Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Since mentoring involves interpersonal relationships, it is not surprising that studies have found attachment security influencing mentoring. Consistent with attachment theory, protégés with insecure states of mind have difficulties in establishing relationships with mentors. Specifically, individuals presenting high dismissing attachment tendencies report difficulties in seeking help from college mentors and low levels of trust in potential supporters (Larose & Bernier, 2001). Further, both dismissing and preoccupied states of mind in college students have been associated with negative evaluations of an academic mentoring relationship and lower perceptions of security in mentoring (Larose, Bernier, & Soucy, 2004). Bernier, Larose and Soucy in their landmark study in 2005 found that the student's and professor's contrasting predispositions interacted to predict students' self-disclosure and comfort with proximity, and their satisfaction with mentoring. People who experience difficulty with autonomy (such as preoccupied individuals) can benefit from working with an independent person who seems to be interpersonally competent. In contrast, an individual who has difficulty developing close relationships (such as in dismissing individuals) might benefit from working with someone who is comfortable with intimacy and also appears interpersonally competent. The findings of this study suggest that an academic mentor is most effective when able to provide the protégé with a challenging relational stance that is not in line with the protégé's own.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Although limited research has been done in the area of academic mentoring and attachment styles, this study did not find any research done on employee mentoring and attachment styles. However, much adult research demonstrates the connection between attachment styles, work attitudes and work behavior. Securely attached adults are more socially competent (Caldwell, 1995), likely to use collaborative communication (Kummel, 1999), and more open to negative interpersonal feedback (Neuson, 1998). They report higher levels of personal competence, higher self-esteem than insecurely attached adults (Meyers, 1998) and are more relationship-oriented than task-oriented (Doverspike et al, 1997). Therefore, secure attachment can be seen as the foundation for relationship competence and social competence. Avoidant adults are significantly less satisfied with interpersonal aspects of work, particularly with co-workers (Hazan & Shaver, 1990), suggesting that they lack the relationship competence that is needed of the mentor or the protégé. Therefore, studies need to be done to determine the type of person drawn to mentoring, the protégé whom mentors are likely to attract, the consequences of mentoring, and the contextual cues under which mentoring can flourish.

It could be productive to study whether the moderating effect of attachment in a mentoring relationship is more pronounced in the beginning or is stable throughout the mentoring experience. Attachment researchers would argue for the latter whereas mentoring researchers would be more inclined to suggest that mentoring may under certain circumstances buffer the negative impact of attachment insecurity, thus viewing attachment as a malleable characteristic that may change progressively through the mentoring experience. Organizations may go beyond selecting mentors based on professional characteristics like experience and position held. They could select mentors with secure attachment style, and assist potential mentors with insecure attachment styles with appropriate interventions. They can strengthen mentoring experiences by intentionally developing social competencies. Emotional support skills and conflict management skills would benefit the potential mentor while self-disclosure skills would benefit the potential protégé. They could also provide employees who are not predisposed to benefit from mentoring relationships with alternative developmental activities. In the area of academic mentoring, since so few studies have been done with attachment styles, studies need to be replicated.

## Conclusions

As befitting a new area of study, much needs to be understood, and the most appropriate research paradigms have yet to be developed. The attachment literature begins to fill in a theoretical gap in the mentoring area, and as such provides a solid base for future research. Relationship competence, emotional intelligence and transformational leadership all derive from the same underlying “strata” of human motivation, which are relationship tendencies developed early in life, modified through life experience, and lived out in work and personal experiences. Unless these “working models” of relationships, called attachment styles, are taken into account, mentor-protégé matching and mentoring efforts will likely have limited success. Obviously, a whole new dimension of research needs to be done by adult development and human resources development researchers to explore the psychological construct of attachment style as a dependent variable for predicting success in mentoring relationships.

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