

## Research Article

Attachment styles at work: Measurement, collegial relationships, and burnout<sup>☆</sup>Michael P. Leiter<sup>a,\*</sup>, Arla Day<sup>b</sup>, Lisa Price<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> Psychology Department, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS, Canada B4P 2R6<sup>b</sup> Psychology Department, Saint Mary's University, 923 Robie St., Halifax, NS, Canada B3H 3C3

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## ABSTRACT

Although the potential deleterious effects of negative social interactions at work have been well established in the literature, the impact of personal factors in forming work relationships has been relatively neglected. Therefore, using a survey of 1624 Canadian healthcare providers, we examined the extent to which attachment styles at work were associated with the quality of social relationships. We found support for a new measure of attachment styles at work that differentiated between anxiety and avoidance attachment. Avoidance was negatively correlated with positive social constructs (civility, psychological safety, and trust) and with the efficacy dimension of burnout. Overall, compared to attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety was more strongly correlated with experienced and instigated workplace incivility, exhaustion, and cynicism. Attachment avoidance was negatively correlated with positive social constructs (civility, psychological safety, and trust) and with the efficacy dimension of burnout. Adding these two attachment dimensions to a model of burnout as a function of workload, value congruence, and coworker incivility significantly improved its fit. This study suggests that employees with high attachment anxiety tend to be more closely involved in work relationships and processes, but this closeness comes at a cost in that they experience more strain when participating in social encounters.

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## 1. Introduction

Much of contemporary work occurs in a social context. Healthcare work is especially social in that employees work in teams that call for ongoing contact among colleagues, managers, and members of other professions or workgroups. Furthermore, most work in healthcare settings directly or indirectly pertains to patient care, often requiring interactions with patients and their families. Even if this work generally goes smoothly, employees regularly encounter strained social interactions with colleagues, other professionals, managers, and patients (Pearson & Porath, 2009) that may lead to negative individual outcomes, such as strain and burnout (Leiter, Day, Laschinger, & Gilin-Oore, 2012). To some extent, employees call upon their professional training and life experience to manage difficult social circumstances. Personal capabilities and resources

permit some employees to function, or even thrive, despite strained social encounters. However, personal constraints, such as persistent mistrust, can negatively influence thoughts about cooperating with colleagues. In developmental and social psychology, one of the key theories of developing effective social relationships is attachment theory. Although attachment has been used to explain individual differences in emotional and physical reactions to stress, styles of coping, and thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a variety of interpersonal relationship situations (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Miller, 2007), it has been only recently applied to understanding interpersonal relationships at work.

This relative lack of attention in the organizational literature, however, should not be misconstrued as it being unimportant in our understanding of work relationships. In fact, because of their ability to influence the quality of adult relationships, attachment styles must be considered as an important part of social relationships at work (Collins & Read, 1990), and therefore, has relevance to workplace relationships. For example, a recent article published in Financial Times highlights how executives often become an 'emotional dumping ground' for employees due to the tendency of employees to implicitly recreate early relationships in the workplace (Shragai, 2014, para. 18). Executives can be left feeling somewhat ill-informed in how to deal with the emotional

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spillover from employees (Shragai, 2014). As such, a more developed understanding of attachment theory may be beneficial in understanding social relationships, and the related emotions, at work. Therefore, we explored the efficacy of using attachment theory in the workplace to help explain social relationships and predict individual outcomes. More specifically, we examined the potential of this theory to explain healthcare providers' experience of the social context of their workplace by developing and validating a measure of attachment at work, and examining the relationships between attachment and burnout and civility outcomes. That is, we: (1) introduce a new measure of workplace attachment; (2) link attachment styles to workplace social encounters; (3) link attachment styles to job burnout; and (4) expand a model of job burnout to encompass attachment styles.

### 1.1. Social relationships at work

There is convincing evidence that social relationships at work have a significant impact on individual health, strain, and burnout (Day & Leiter, 2014; Leiter & Patterson, 2014). Not only is greater social support associated with encountering few distressing demands, but social support buffers the stressful impact of demands when they are encountered (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). In contrast, uncivil or abusive social encounters are exhausting in themselves and may contribute to spirals of increasing distress that is associated with further unpleasant social encounters at work (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Although research has focused primarily on organizational factors associated with poor social relationships at work, it also has considered individual factors associated with displaying or receiving negative social behavior at work (Cortina, 2008; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). An incivility spiral encompasses processes in which the emotional impact of receiving incivility prompts people to exhibit incivility toward others. Models explaining spirals emphasize the social dynamics and workplace values pertaining to civil behavior (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Fortunately, there also is a potential for positive spirals, in which receiving civil behavior prompts people to experience positive emotions and to exhibit more civility in return (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Less attention has been given to identifying personal characteristics that may be associated with incivility. However, the construct of incivility has special relevance on this point because the subjective nature of assessing its occurrence. Because the formal definition of the construct acknowledges ambiguous intent, the characterization of a behavior as uncivil lies entirely with the recipient of that behavior (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Neither the intention of the actor nor a standardized description of rude social behaviors indicates whether a behavior is uncivil. In related research, personal characteristics impact one's perceptions and experiences. For example, negative affectivity may increase recipients' perception of bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011) and incivility (Penney & Spector, 2005). In a comprehensive meta-analysis of workplace harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), the only individual difference variable with a consistent relationship with harassment was negative affectivity. The authors reflected that the research to that point was inconclusive regarding the extent to which negative affectivity predisposed employees to harassment or resulted from the experience of harassment. They also speculated on potential connections of personality characteristics—conscientiousness and agreeableness specifically—to workplace mistreatment but found little research examining these possible links. Aquino and Thau (2009) found a similar pattern regarding victimization from workplace aggression. They found the most enduring relationships to be with negative affectivity and concurred that the extant research offered little insight on the extent to which negative affectivity was a precursor or consequence of experiencing aggression. The

research on the links of victimization with the big five personality characteristics was inconclusive and contradictory, but there was some support for self-esteem having consistent negative relationships with victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Information about personal dispositions that are closely associated with the way people perceive and cognitively process social relationships could provide more specific directions for developing a model of workplace social behavior than the general construct of negative affectivity.

One reason for the inconsistent results regarding the connections of personal characteristics with experiences of mistreatment may be the general nature of the personal characteristics studied. For example, only one of the big five personality characteristics, agreeableness, directly references social qualities. In contrast, the core dimensions of attachment explicitly reference social perception and social behavior. As such, they may have a greater potential for establishing links with employees' experience of their workplace social environments.

### 1.2. Attachment theory

Attachment theory suggests that individuals are innately predisposed to seek out comfort and safety from an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). Constructs from attachment theory may explain how individuals perceive, react to, and cope with stress arising from interpersonal relationships (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995). Depending on the consistency of care in times of stress, individuals develop internal working models of self and others and a relatively stable pattern of stress response known as attachment style. According to attachment theory, individuals who have experienced consistent and supportive care from an attachment figure develop a secure attachment style (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Those who experience inconsistent availability or consistent unavailability from an attachment figure are theorized to develop an anxious or avoidant attachment style, respectively (Hazan & Shaver, 1990).

Attachment styles can be conceptualized using a two-dimensional approach in terms of avoidance of intimacy and anxiety over abandonment (Bowlby, 1969; Miller, 2007). Individuals who are on the lower end of both dimensions are described as more securely attached. Securely attached individuals have positive internal working models of both self and others: They are comfortable in relationships, have high self-efficacy in dealing with stress, and believe that others will be available to provide support when needed. Securely attached individuals tend to have better mental and physical health than insecurely attached individuals (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995).

Individuals higher on anxiety about abandonment tend to have a negative view of self (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995). They tend to be hypersensitive to signs of rejection and they have a compulsive need to be close to others. Ironically, this persistent need for closeness often prompts distance-seeking in the other person, which, in a cyclical fashion, can make those higher on anxiety attachment even needier (Miller, 2007). Furthermore, Mikulincer and Florian (1995) attributed perceived unavailability from attachment figures to an individual's perceived own unworthiness of positive regard. Additionally, individuals high on anxiety attachment are likely to avoid instigating and participating in conflicts, because it may increase chances of abandonment. Mikulincer and Florian argued that individuals who are anxious about abandonment consistently monitor their social environment for cues that support their beliefs about themselves. Furthermore, support for their beliefs is consistently sought after even if those beliefs are negative.

Individuals higher on avoidance of intimacy typically have a negative view of others. They are compulsively self-reliant because they do not trust that others will be available to them when needed, and to the same degree, they often do not want people to depend

on them (Miller, 2007). They prefer to keep a safe emotional distance from others when stressed (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995). This preference for distance is not only motivated by a negative view of people but also by distrust (Collins & Read, 1990). Because individuals who are high on avoidance often do not seek the company of others, it is common for them not to experience supportive relationships that would contradict their previous beliefs about relationships (Miller, 2007). Without exposure to these relationships that challenge existing beliefs, the avoidant attachment style can persist throughout one's adult life (Fraley, 2002).

### 1.2.1. Attachment at work

Kets De Vries (1980) strongly advocated for the application of clinical practices to better understand workplace behavior. In his work as an organizational consultant, De Vries found that not all workplace behaviors were easily explained, such that managers viewed certain aspects of employee behavior as paradoxical. However, De Vries argued that the realities of these seemingly contradictory behaviors can be better understood through clinical principles. Building on this notion, Hazan and Shaver (1990) were among the first to apply attachment theory to the workplace. In their seminal article, they found that securely attached individuals reported being more satisfied with various facets of their jobs, such as feeling competent and challenged at work, feeling secure with the job, and liking their coworkers. Secure individuals also had fewer psychological, psychosomatic, or physical symptoms of illness in comparison to insecurely attached individuals. According to Hazan and Shaver, individuals categorized as anxious/ambivalent were more worried about being rejected by coworkers and concerned about the approval of others in the workplace. Finally, avoidant individuals were most likely to prefer to work alone and to use work as a way to avoid socializing.

A fundamental issue for attachment theory is whether secure attachment is adequately defined by the absence of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. One solution to this question has been to explicitly define and assess secure attachment as a distinct construct in addition to assessing indicators of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (e.g., Joplin, Nelson, & Quick, 1999). An alternative solution follows the work of Fraley and Waller (1998) by using both positively worded and negatively worded items to assess anxiety and avoidance on two dimensions, Fraley and Waller found strong support for a two-dimensional model of adult attachment. Their work supports two latent dimensions that map onto the avoidance and anxiety dimensions of Bartholomew's model (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b). Employees higher on anxiety about abandonment might be more likely to misperceive social situations due to their concerns with feeling judged, criticized, and rejected. This misperception may be particularly pertinent when dealing with incivility: Because of the ambiguous nature of incivility, individuals higher on attachment anxiety may be more likely to perceive innocuous acts as being uncivil. Thus, the anxiety associated with pervasive social interaction would be exhausting (Sonntag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010). These concerns have the potential of inhibiting more anxious employees from effective team participation or clinical responsiveness as their social behavior might reflect their internal fears rather than responding appropriately to concerns of colleagues, clients, or patients. These experiences would contribute to more strained relationships with people at work. The burden of compensating for this mismatch of personal inclinations with their work context would increase their work demands.

The two dimensions of attachment have implications for employees dealing with the public. For example, although people may choose healthcare careers because of a preference to work with people, Savickas (2001) argued that they may lack insight into their actual capacity to find fulfillment in such work. Furthermore,

attachment avoidance presents distinct challenges for healthcare occupations and other industries working closely with the clients. Individuals higher on attachment avoidance are compulsively self-reliant, and thus, they prefer to avoid close friendships or emotional involvement with others (Bartholomew, 1990). Mistrust characterizes social encounters with their colleagues or service recipients. The lack of emotional connection with other people would deprive avoidant employees of the potential benefits of a full participation in their team or their workplace community. Bartholomew argued that their social encounters with others may not be actively unpleasant but they lack emotional closeness. Interacting with others through the formal structure of professional roles that provides emotional distancing from their colleagues would be well suited to individuals who are higher on attachment avoidance (Bartholomew, 1990; Bowlby, 1969). We propose that in contrast to personal relationships, in which avoidance would be associated with isolation or loneliness, workplace avoidance would permit ongoing social contact within the welcomed constraints of professional roles.

### 1.3. Civility and incivility at work

Research on workplace incivility has identified the disruptive impact of low intensity social encounters of ambiguous intent (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Leiter (2013) proposed a model emphasizing risk perception as a dimension of incivility. When people experience social encounters as uncivil, they feel a risk for additional harm. We propose that a persistent sense of mistrust in social encounters has the potential to aggravate this dynamic. A workplace that permits disrespectful relationships cannot be trusted to protect employees from humiliation, abuse, or other forms of mistreatment. The identification of an uncivil interaction and the power of its impact depend to some degree on how the participants make sense of social relationships. Some people dismiss some uncivil interactions as trivial; others often experience incivility as extremely distressing (Leiter, 2013). One element contributing to these variations in experience could be social cognitions. We explore the proposition that the core dimensions of attachment theory—*anxiety about abandonment and avoidance of intimacy*—contribute to that sense-making process.

In general, anxiety may be more closely tied to the quality of social encounters at work because anxiety reflects a broad spectrum of concerns, including fear of embarrassment when in the presence of other people as well as fear of being deserted when alone (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). The general tendency is that higher scores on anxiety or avoidance are associated with a more negative experience of work and social relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). Anxiety may be more closely tied to the quality of social encounters at work because anxiety reflects a broad spectrum of concerns, including fear of embarrassment when in the presence of other people as well as fear of being deserted when alone (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Avoidance is less tied to the nature of social encounters because avoidance behaviors escape emotional connection. We propose that individuals higher on attachment avoidance limit social encounters within professional roles. In this context, violations of professional decorum would be a form of incivility; however the formal nature of workplace relationships for employees with high levels of avoidance would reduce the emotional impact of a social encounter even when it is perceived as uncivil or disrespectful.

Harms (2011) described consistent patterns of social relationships associated with attachment styles. He argued that in a social situation, people who are more securely or anxiously attached aspire to closeness, but people characterized as high on avoidance of attachment, do not aspire to such closeness. When in

close relationships, secure individuals have the capacity to build trusting relationships while those higher on attachment anxiety maintain mistrust (Tidwell, Reis, & Shaver, 1996). Attachment anxiety prompts intense emotions in social encounters in contrast to secure people who maintain emotional stability (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998). Given that those higher on attachment anxiety are hyper-vigilant to signs of rejection, they would be more apt to perceive incivility in all social exchanges and would experience more distress when they experience incivility. Individuals high in attachment avoidance may be more sensitive to some forms of incivility, such as perceived inappropriate intimacy (e.g., discussing personal matters at work; see the Workplace Incivility Scale; Cortina et al., 2001), but they may be more likely to overlook or miss cues of other forms of incivility, such as being ignored or other forms of inconsideration.

In summary, the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance that underlie attachment styles are likely associated with social behavior at work. Incivility among colleagues violates ideals for professional conduct and contradicts practical considerations for high quality team performance. We proposed that dispositional tendencies reflected in attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety may further clarify the processes that sustain poor social encounters among members of workgroups. In line with principles of attachment theory, we expect attachment anxiety and avoidance to be reflected in the level of civility and incivility employees encounter at work. Because trust is a fundamental issue in this theory, attachment styles should be negatively associated with employees' level of trust and their sense of psychological safety.

#### 1.4. Trust at work

In management research, trust is defined as, "the extent to which one is willing to ascribe good intentions to and have confidence in the words and actions of other people" (Cook & Wall, 1980, p. 40). In team-based work cultures, trust has been found to predict better performance and greater innovation (Gilson, 2006; Laschinger, Finegan, Shamian, & Casier, 2000). Trust is closely related to civility and has been shown to improve when civility is improved in a workplace intervention (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Gilin-Oore, 2011). Improvement in trust has been identified as a primary indicator of the viability of a healthcare system both for effective patient care and personal fulfillment for providers (Berwick, 2003). Factors that inhibit the development of trusting relationships present a practical concern for healthcare leadership.

Closely aligned with civility and trust is psychological safety, "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 45). The balance of civility and incivility evident in workplace social interactions provides employees with clues for assessing the team's riskiness. Employees' level of psychological safety reflects their experience in the workplace (Leiter & Laschinger, 2011; Pearsall & Ellis, 2011), providing an overview of their perception of the team's trustworthiness. It reflects employees' relationships with colleagues and supervisors. Moreover, psychological safety may reflect employees' propensity to form trusting relationships. That is, employees' assessment of low psychological safety may reflect more than an objective evaluation of the risks in the social environment: it also may reflect the employees' overall approach to perceiving relationship as reflected in attachment anxiety or avoidance.

Social relationships are important in themselves but they are also instrumental to fulfilling professional roles and obligations. Attachment styles not only play a role in the perception of social encounters but also have implications for employees' experience of worklife through teamwork and patient contact. We now consider

how healthcare workers higher on insecure attachment have a greater potential for experiencing job burnout.

#### 1.5. Job burnout

Job burnout is a syndrome of chronic exhaustion accompanied by psychological distancing from work in the form of cynicism or depersonalization. A lack of professional efficacy or diminished sense of accomplishment completes the syndrome (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Research on job burnout has consistently linked the syndrome with strained social relationships at work with distinct contributions for supervisory relationships and collegial relationships (Day & Leiter, 2014). Recent research has confirmed that improvements in the quality of collegial relationships are followed by improvements in exhaustion and cynicism (Leiter et al., 2011), and that these improvements are evident at a one-year follow-up assessment (Leiter, Nicholson, Patterson, & Laschinger, 2012).

Psychological distancing has a defining role in both job burnout and attachment theory. The original conception of human service burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) proposed that depersonalization—removing the emotional connection from social encounters with service recipients—reflects attempts to cope with exhaustion. Emotional social encounters are energy-intensive (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Morris & Feldman, 1996). To stem the pace at which energy is being depleted, service providers may develop an impersonal social style. Other perspectives have proposed that cynicism (the parallel aspect within the general version of the MBI (Maslach Burnout Inventory—General Scale; Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996)) reflects an inability to invest energy in work when experiencing exhaustion. The general burnout concept broadens the original human service burnout perspective to propose that therapeutic relationships with patients are not the sole, or even major, source of emotional demands at work. Any type of work can prompt emotional exhaustion, but work that demands intense concentration, social encounters, or creativity are especially apt to drain emotional energy (de Jonge, Spoor, Sonnentag, Dormann, & van den Tooren, 2012; Gutnick, Walter, Nijstad, & De Dreu, 2012; Maslach et al., 1996).

Recent research has found relationships of both attachment anxiety and avoidance with job burnout. For example, managers' attachment insecurity predicted greater burnout and less satisfaction among employees within their workgroups (Ronen & Mikulincer, 2012). Littman-Ovadia, Oren, and Lavy (2013) found that the relationships of attachment avoidance with work-related outcomes were stronger under conditions of high job autonomy. Therefore, we predict that both types of attachment insecurity will predict higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism.

As noted, healthcare providers have a high level of ongoing social contact with service recipients and/or colleagues. For people higher on attachment anxiety, ongoing social contact will make exceptional demands on their energy beyond the usual demands of such contact. Given that concerns about social rejection predict burnout in those who are more anxiously attached (Ronen & Baldwin, 2010), we predict that relative to attachment avoidance, the relationship between attachment anxiety exhaustion and cynicism will be especially strong. Attachment anxiety augments the demanding quality of social encounters because the anxious person must contend with both the experience of anxiety per se as well as attempts to cope with that experience. When experiencing stressful demands, reducing anxiety takes priority over attending to job performance (Bohlmeijer, Prenger, Taal, & Cuijpers, 2010).

Attachment styles also have implications for the reduced efficacy component of burnout. The more problematic social relationships associated with anxiety and the more distant relationships associated with avoidance could interfere with



employees' capacity to find a sense of accomplishment or confirmation of their professional efficacy through their work. Much of hospital care is a team effort in which a variety of healthcare providers interact with a given patient over a series of shifts. Most accomplishments are shared accomplishments. Without a foundation of trusting relationships with colleagues, insecurely attached employees may have difficulties sharing the team's accomplishments. Without strong therapeutic relationships with patients, they limit or do not trust the direct feedback available from service recipients. Therefore, we predict that more insecurely attached individuals will have a lower level of efficacy in the workplace.

Research on incivility at work has consistently noted its reciprocal nature (Pearson & Porath, 2009): People who report more frequent *received* incivility also report more frequent *instigated* incivility. Consistency of received incivility with instigated incivility may reflect the social culture of the work settings. That is, cultures vary in their tolerance for incivility or their active promotion of civility (Lim & Lee, 2011). Another contributing factor may be that more frequent reciprocal incivility reflects a dearth of social skills. Both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance have been associated with poor social skills (Cooper et al., 1998), suggesting a mechanism through which both forms of insecure attachment may be related to greater frequency of incivility, both instigated and received.

#### 1.6. Measurement of attachment

There has been a long-standing debate around how to conceptualize and measure adult attachment in peer and romantic relationships. Historically, researchers have used a categorical approach (e.g., The Adult Attachment Interview; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; The Relationships Questionnaire; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1990) or used a three-dimensional approach (i.e., interdependent, counterdependent, and overdependent; Joplin et al., 1999). Fraley and Waller (1998) found the two dimensions mapped onto the avoidance and anxiety dimensions of Bartholomew's model (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b). Furthermore, they noted a number of limits to the taxonomic approach, such as the kinds of research questions that can be asked, statistical power, and the ability to assess the stability of attachment over time.

More recent self-report measures use a dimensional approach (e.g., Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). However, most adult measures of attachment tend to focus on relationships with the family of origin or intimate partners (Fraley et al., 2000; Main et al., 1985). To our knowledge, there are no measures of adult attachment that are specific to relationships within the workplace. Existing measures, such as The Experience in Close Relationships scale, have limitations in their application to relationships at work (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) because many of the items refer to romantic relationships. These items may limit a measures' applicability, because it is likely that people experience work-based relationships differently from romantic relationships prompting distinct anxiety and avoidance orientations. Another limitation is that the two dimensions are not orthogonal. For example, Ronen and Mikulincer (2009) reported that anxiety and avoidance were correlated ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ) and that the two scales had nearly equivalent correlations with the three aspects of job burnout, organizational fairness, and work-group cohesion.

Finally, Fraley (2002) argued that the two-dimension approach is the most accepted approach in contemporary attachment theory research. Therefore, our study used a new Short Workplace Attachment Measure (SWAM; Leiter, Price, & Day, 2013) that builds on previous attachment measures and makes specific reference to relationships at work. There is no evidence that attachment styles

remain stable across personal and work domains, and it is likely that work relationships have distinct qualities from romantic or family relationships. A thorough consideration of the stability and domain specificity of attachment styles would potentially increase the relevance of the construct. For example, confirmation of fluidity in attachment styles would encourage professional development initiatives designed to assist leaders to gain insight into their own attachment perspectives and those of their employees, and to adapt their perspective as situations warrant. A general sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 1991) has relevance to both domains, but the emotional quality or importance of belonging in one's personal life is likely distinct from one's worklife. Therefore, an effective measure of workplace attachment qualities would be sensitive to the distinct qualities of attachment anxiety in contrast to attachment avoidance. That is, the two dimensions would not be highly correlated with one another and that they would differ in their correlations with other constructs in ways that are consistent with their distinct qualities.

#### 1.7. Summary and hypotheses

Social relationships play an integral part in many workplaces, especially in healthcare. Much research has examined attachment theory in a variety of social situations in order to understand and improve patterns of social relationships (Kets De Vries, 1980; Hazan & Shaver, 1990), yet little work has examined this theory in the workplace. Therefore, we developed and validated a measure of attachment at work to examine the extent to which this theory may help us improve healthcare providers' experience of the social context of their workplace. We first examined the extent to which the new attachment at work scale accurately represented the attachment construct. Because research has supported two distinct dimensions of social relationships (anxiety and avoidance; Mikulincer & Florian, 1995), we hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 1.** The anxiety and avoidance dimensions of adult attachment styles will factor into two separate, yet correlated, components (i.e., anxiety and avoidance).

Both of these forms of insecure attachment reduce the potential for people to experience fulfilling social relationships at work (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), and thus, should be incompatible with a sense of accomplishment or efficacy at work, trust in others, and feeling 'safe' at work. Moreover, these forms of insecure attachment have been associated with negative personal outcomes in social situations (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Therefore, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 2.** Both anxiety and avoidance will be negatively associated with (a) professional efficacy, (b) trust (c) psychological safety, and (d) civility; and positively associated with (e) incivility, (f) exhaustion, and (g) cynicism,

We also propose that attachment avoidance and anxiety will differ in the extent to which they are related to some of these constructs. That is, attachment anxiety prompts employees to seek close social relationships in hopes of alleviating insecurity. However, because of their tendency to look for signs of rejection and mistrust signs of acceptance, individuals higher on anxiety are more likely to perceive unpleasant social encounters. In contrast, individuals higher on attachment avoidance are more likely to avoid close social contact, and thus be less likely to notice some forms of incivility than individuals who are higher on attachment anxiety.

**Hypothesis 3.** Compared to attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety will be more highly correlated with all forms of experienced incivility and instigated incivility.

Similarly, anxious employees' participation in close workplace relationships with colleagues and service recipients will make

exceptional demands upon their energy and their involvement with work. The less intense social involvement associated with avoidance should result in less exhaustion or disengagement with work.

**Hypothesis 4.** Compared to avoidance, anxiety will be more highly correlated with exhaustion and cynicism.

To move attachment research forward in a work context, it is important that attachment concepts fit into a theoretical framework commonly used in organizational research. Specifically, it is proposed that the attachment dimensions will make significant contributions to an existing model of job burnout as a function of workload and coworker incivility (Leiter, Nicholson, et al., 2012).

**Hypothesis 5.** Both anxiety and avoidance will uniquely predict exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy, after controlling for workload, value congruence, and coworker incivility.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participating organizations were four healthcare districts in Eastern Canada. Participants included first-line managers (FLMs;  $N=157$ ) and frontline staff ( $N=1624$ ). The average age for staff members was 43.14 years ( $SD=10.84$ ) and for FLMs was 47.35 years ( $SD=8.68$ ) ( $t_{(1978)}=4.94, p<.001$ ). Staff members had an average of 15.97 years of healthcare experience ( $SD=12.61$ ); FLMs had an average 16.98 years ( $SD=11.42$ ) ( $t_{(1978)}=1.02, p\leq.310$ ). Participants were from a wide range of healthcare professions with the largest single group from nursing. The analyses used only data from frontline staff because staff and FLMs differed on many measures in the study in addition to the demographics.

### 2.2. Procedure

After receiving ethics approval from all participating hospitals and universities, the research team distributed surveys to healthcare providers in four hospital districts in eastern Canada. The project was presented as focusing on first line managers in healthcare and their challenges in managing the social environment of their workgroups during major organizational change. Participants had the option of completing the survey online or on paper.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Attachment styles

Attachment styles were assessed with the 10-item Brief Attachment Questionnaire comprising two subscales: anxiety (5-items) and avoidance (5-items; Leiter et al., 2013). The scale makes specific reference to relationships at work. Using a 5-point Likert type scale (1 – not at all like me; 3 – somewhat like me; 5 – very much like me), respondents indicated the extent to which items described them (e.g., anxiety – “I worry that others don’t value me as much as I value them”; avoidance – “I don’t need close friendships at work”). Cronbach’s alphas were  $\alpha = .78$  (anxiety) and  $\alpha = .78$  (avoidance).

#### 2.3.2. Burnout

Burnout was measured with the 16-item Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Scale (MBI–GS; Maslach et al., 1996) assessing exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy. Participants used a 7-point frequency scale (ranging from 0–never to 6–daily) to indicate the extent to which they experienced each item (e.g., “I feel emotionally drained from my work.”). Cronbach’s alphas were  $\alpha = .94$  for Emotional Exhaustion;  $\alpha = .81$  for Cynicism; and  $\alpha = .88$  for Professional Efficacy.

#### 2.3.3. Incivility

Incivility was measured with the 12-item Straightforward Incivility Scale (Leiter & Day, 2013) that included three subscales: supervisor, coworker, and instigated incivility. Participants used a 7-point frequency scale (ranging from 0 – never to 6 – daily) to indicate the extent to which they experienced uncivil behaviors from supervisors and coworkers, (e.g., “Spoke rudely to you.”) and the extent to which they engaged in uncivil behaviors toward others (e.g., “Spoke rudely to others”). Cronbach’s alphas were  $\alpha = .82$  for supervisor incivility;  $\alpha = .94$  for coworker incivility; and  $\alpha = .90$  for one’s own instigated incivility.

#### 2.3.4. Workgroup civility

Workgroup Civility was measured with the 8-item CREW civility scale (Osatuke et al., 2009). Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree) to indicate the extent to which they endorsed each item (e.g., “People treat each other with respect in my work group.”). Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .89$ .

#### 2.3.5. Psychological safety

Three items from a scale developed by Edmondson (1999) measured psychological safety. Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree) to indicate the extent to which they felt safe in their group (e.g., “It is safe to take a risk in this work group.”). Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .81$ , with inter-item correlations ranging from  $r = .50$  to  $.70$ .

#### 2.3.6. Coworker and supervisor trust

Coworker trust and supervisor trust were each measured with three items from the trust subscale developed by Cook and Wall (1980). Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree) to indicate the extent to which they felt they could trust their coworker or supervisor (e.g., “I can trust my co-workers to lend me a hand if I needed it”; “My own supervisor is sincere in his/her attempts to meet the workers’ point of view”). Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .72$  for coworker trust and  $\alpha = .88$  for supervisor trust.

#### 2.3.7. Manageable workload

Manageable workload was measured using the Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS; Leiter & Maslach, 2004). The items are worded as statements of perceived congruence or incongruence between oneself and the job. Higher scores on manageable workload indicate a better fit. All items (e.g., “I do not have time to do the work that must be done”) are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. In the current study, the internal consistency was:  $\alpha = .79$ .

Value Congruence. Value Congruence was measured using the Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS; Leiter & Maslach, 2004). The items are worded as statements of perceived congruence or incongruence between oneself and the job. All items (e.g., “My values and the organization’s values are alike”) are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. In the current study, the internal consistency was:  $\alpha = .77$ .

## 3. Results

In order to examine the factor structure of the Short Workplace Attachment Measure (SWAM), we conducted both an exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Table 1 displays a principal components factor analysis with Varimax rotation on the 10 SWAM items, indicating two clear factors labeled anxiety and avoidance. The two factors accounted for 54.54% of the variance, and all assigned loadings were greater than .56 and cross-loadings were

**Table 1**  
Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation of attachment.

#	Item	Anxiety	Avoidance
6	I worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.	<b>.78</b>	.06
9	I worry that I won't measure up to other people at work.	<b>.76</b>	-.01
8	I fear that friends at work will let me down.	<b>.72</b>	.08
4	Others are often reluctant to be as close as I would prefer at work.	<b>.66</b>	.10
10	I'm afraid to reveal too much about myself to people at work.	<b>.62</b>	-.23
3	I make close friendships at work. (R)	-.06	<b>.84</b>
1	I like to have close personal relationships with people at work. (R)	.04	<b>.82</b>
7	A close friendship is a necessary part of a good working relationship. (R)	.10	<b>.77</b>
2	I work hard at developing close working relationships. (R)	.05	<b>.66</b>
5	I don't need close friendships at work.	.15	<b>-.56</b>

Bold values indicate coefficients > .50 on the appropriate factor.

**Table 2**  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations of all study variables.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Anxiety	1.98	.75	<b>.78</b>													
Avoidance	2.94	.85	.01	<b>.78</b>												
Exhaustion	2.19	1.49	.19	.03	<b>.94</b>											
Cynicism	1.42	1.22	.24	.05	.64	<b>.81</b>										
Efficacy	4.18	1.04	-.20	-.13	-.22	-.35	<b>.88</b>									
Supervisor incivility	.64	1.11	.13	.07	.39	.42	-.15	<b>.82</b>								
Coworker incivility	.69	1.04	.26	.09	.28	.29	-.13	.22	<b>.94</b>							
Instigated incivility	.28	.46	.17	.05	.26	.32	-.14	.29	.53	<b>.90</b>						
Civility	3.73	.70	-.24	-.25	-.32	-.41	.33	-.39	-.53	-.34	<b>.89</b>					
Psych. Safety	3.39	.89	-.23	-.19	-.35	-.42	.28	-.41	-.47	-.28	.77	<b>.81</b>				
Coworker trust	4.11	.64	-.27	-.18	-.19	-.26	.26	-.22	-.45	-.30	.61	.52	<b>.72</b>			
Supervisor trust	3.68	1.06	-.14	-.11	-.40	-.49	.27	-.70	-.17	-.24	.47	.52	.26	<b>.88</b>		
Manageable workload	3.03	.90	-.10	-.01	-.58	-.28	.10	-.20	-.17	-.09	.16	.14	.10	.19	<b>.79</b>	
Value congruence	3.43	.75	-.09	-.10	-.31	-.40	.33	-.28	-.16	-.18	.34	.31	.24	.37	.14	<b>.77</b>

N = 1624. All correlations  $r > .06$  are significant at  $p < .01$ . Reliabilities are along the diagonal. Bold values indicate coefficients > .50 on the appropriate factor.

.23 or less, supporting Hypothesis 1. The factors were weakly correlated  $r = .02$ , n.s.

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) conducted with EQS (Bentler & Chou, 1987). In this analysis, no error covariances were freed; the first item in each factor was fixed at 1.00 and the other items within each factor were freed. The covariance of the two factors was fixed. The CFA also supported a two-factor model with an adequate fit ( $\chi^2_{(35)} = 325.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .928, RMSEA = .071), and which was a significantly better fit ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1996.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than a one-factor model ( $\chi^2_{(35)} = 2321.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .434, RMSEA = .196), thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

### 3.1. Relationship with burnout and social variables

The relationships of the attachment dimensions with burnout and social variables are displayed in Table 2. Both attachment anxiety and avoidance were significantly correlated with efficacy ( $r = -.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ; respectively), coworker trust ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = -.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supervisor trust ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = -.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and psychological safety ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = -.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thus providing support for Hypothesis 2a, b, and c.

Anxiety also was positively correlated with supervisor incivility ( $r = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), coworker incivility ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), instigated incivility ( $r = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ), exhaustion ( $r = .19$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and cynicism ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and negatively correlated with civility ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, avoidance was significantly correlated only with supervisor incivility ( $r = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ), coworker incivility ( $r = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and civility ( $r = -.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

In order to test whether anxiety was more strongly correlated with incivility and burnout than was avoidance (i.e., Hypotheses

**Table 3**  
Test of dependent correlations of anxiety and avoidance with burnout and incivility.

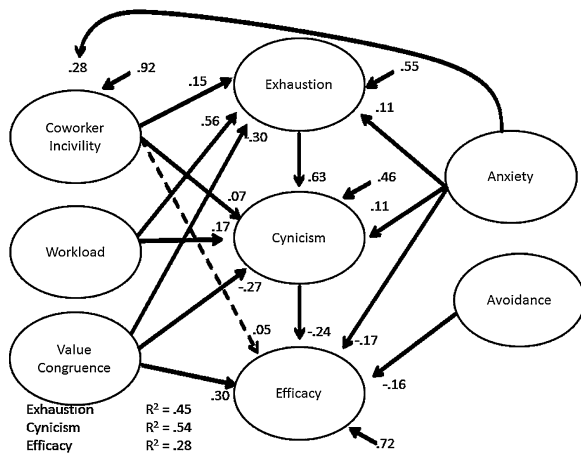
Variable	Attachment anxiety	Attachment avoidance	t of difference
<i>Incivility</i>			
Supervisor incivility	.13	.07	1.78*
Coworker incivility	.26	.09	5.06***
Instigated incivility	.17	.05	3.49**
Workgroup civility	-.24	-.25	.30
<i>Safety &amp; trust</i>			
Psychological safety	-.23	-.19	1.19
Coworker trust	-.27	-.18	2.72**
Supervisor trust	-.14	-.11	.87
<i>Burnout</i>			
Exhaustion	.19	.03	4.79***
Cynicism	.24	.05	5.75***
Efficacy	-.20	-.13	2.11**

\*  $p < .05$ .  
\*\*  $p < .01$ .  
\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

4 and 5), we conducted tests of dependent correlations. Anxiety was more strongly correlated with all forms of incivility than was avoidance (supervisor,  $t = 1.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ; coworker,  $t = 5.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and instigated,  $t = 3.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Table 3). Anxiety was more strongly correlated with exhaustion,  $t = 4.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , and cynicism,  $t = 5.75$ ,  $p < .001$ , and efficacy  $t = 2.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than was avoidance attachment (see Table 3). Therefore, both Hypotheses 4 and 5 were supported.

### 3.2. Attachment contribution to a model of burnout

Finally, to test Hypothesis 6, we conducted a structural equation analysis using EQS (Equations; Bentler & Chou, 1987; Satorra & Bentler, 1988) to examine the contribution of attachment



**Fig. 1.** Expanded model of burnout: the impact of workload, value congruence, coworker incivility, anxiety, and avoidance.

dimensions to predicting burnout beyond measures of workload, value congruence, and coworker incivility. In testing this model, we combined the five items for exhaustion, cynicism, efficacy, coworker incivility, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance into three parcels. We defined workload and values with their respective three items. This approach focuses the analysis on the structural level of the model that is the primary concern in addressing the research question. As noted by Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002) in their discussion of parceling, reducing the number of items is appropriate when the primary research question concerns the relationships among the constructs. Using three parcels to define each construct addresses construct definitions by assuring that the items cluster appropriately and that each construct makes a contribution to the overall model (Leiter & Shaughnessy, 2006). In this analysis, the first item or parcel of each construct was assigned the value 1.00 and the other two items were freed. No error variances were freed.

As noted in Table 4, the Structural Null model that assigns items to factors but leaves the factors uncorrelated has a poor fit, although it is a significant improvement over the Independence model that lacks factor assignment. The Foundation model included two established paths among the burnout subscales: exhaustion to cynicism and cynicism to efficacy. In addition, paths were freed from coworker incivility and from value congruence to each of the three aspects of burnout and from workload to exhaustion and cynicism. Previous research has demonstrated weak and inconsistent relationships of workload with efficacy (Maslach et al., 1996). Anxiety and avoidance were included in the model with no paths to other constructs. This model provided an adequate fit (CFI = .942; RMSEA = .051). The Attachment Model added six paths: anxiety to each of the three aspects of burnout and avoidance to each of the three aspects of burnout. This model provided an improved fit (CFI = .943; RMSEA = .047) that was a significant improvement over the Foundation Model ( $\chi^2_{(6)} = 214.34, p < .001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 6. Two of the paths had very small coefficients (avoidance to exhaustion,  $\beta = -.004$ ; and avoidance to cynicism,  $\beta = .005$ ). Therefore, we examined another Attachment Model that deleted

these two paths, resulting in a nearly identical fit (CFI = .946; RMSEA = .046) and making a significant improvement over the Foundation Model ( $\chi^2_{(4)} = 212.16, p < .001$ ; see Fig. 1).

Adding the attachment dimensions increased the explained variance for all three aspects of burnout (Foundation Model: exhaustion,  $R^2 = .386$ ; cynicism,  $R^2 = .484$ ; efficacy,  $R^2 = .180$ ; Attachment Model: exhaustion,  $R^2 = .391$ ; cynicism,  $R^2 = .494$ ; efficacy,  $R^2 = .233$ ; see Fig. 1). In the final Attachment Model, all paths were statistically significant except for coworker incivility to efficacy ( $\chi^2 = 2.17, p = .141$ ).

**4. Discussion**

The goals of this paper were to develop and validate a work-based attachment styles scale, examining attachment's relationship with incivility, civility, trust, psychological safety, and burnout. This study supports the inclusion of personal attachment styles in the study of workplace constructs, and is particularly relevant to job burnout.

The results provide encouraging evidence for the capacity of attachment styles to provide a distinct and relevant dimension to comprehensive models of workplace experiences. Increasing attention on workplace social relationships has emphasized the benefits of teamwork and the devastating impact of abusive interactions. A persistent issue in this research area is developing clear explanations for the large variance in employees' reactions to a given social environment: That is, some employees manage well, whereas others feel distressed. The current study provides preliminary support that attachment styles may help to explain variations in employees' perception of, and participation in, the social context of work.

We developed a workplace-specific measure of attachment, and we found support for two orthogonal dimensions of anxiety and avoidance in the newly developed social attachment at work scale. As hypothesized, anxiety was associated with incivility, civility, trust, psychological safety, and burnout. However, avoidance was significantly related only to efficacy, civility, and supervisor and coworker incivility, thus providing support for Hypothesis 2 and partial support for Hypothesis 3.

As expected, these two components differed in the strength of their correlations with most of the other variables. That is, compared to avoidance, anxiety was more strongly (and positively) correlated with the negative aspects of worklife, in terms of experienced and instigated incivility, exhaustion, and cynicism, and it was more strongly (and negatively) correlated with the positive aspect of efficacy and coworker trust. Therefore, it appears that avoidance may be a strategy for minimizing distress by simply avoiding social interactions.

Moreover, the correlations of anxiety and avoidance with positive aspects of worklife (i.e., civility, supervisor trust) were similar in magnitude (and significant). That is, both of these types of attachment styles were associated with less workgroup civility, psychological safety, and efficacy, suggesting that neither insecure attachment style may benefit from these types of positive aspects from work and colleagues.

Finally, we then examined the impact of adding these insecure attachment styles to a model of burnout. Even though three

**Table 4**  
Structural equation model of burnout, worklife areas, and attachment styles.

Model	Chi-square	df	CFI	RMSEA	Difference	df	Sig
Independence	15,991.98	276					
Structural null	3344.77	252	.804	.085	12,647.21	24	.001
Foundation model	1306.55	242	.931	.051	2038.22	10	.001
Attachment model (6 paths)	1110.76	235	.943	.047	195.79	7	.001
Attachment model (4 paths)	1112.94	237	.943	.046	193.61	5	.001



of the pathways were not significant, the additions of attachment improved the model fit, and both avoidance and anxiety made significant contributions to predicting the three aspects of burnout beyond the contribution of workload and value congruence with distinct paths for anxiety to exhaustion and cynicism and for avoidance to efficacy.

The results of these analyses encourage further exploration of attachment styles as a meaningful component of employees' experience of workplace relationships. The relationships with both received and instigated incivility suggest a pervasive role of these cognitive/emotional schemas for interpreting the social context of work. The relationship of anxiety with the exhaustion and cynicism aspects of burnout, even after controlling for the effects of workload and value congruence, suggests a close association of attachment and employees' experience of their careers. This relationship may be especially relevant for employees such as the healthcare providers, whose work involves ongoing social relationships.

Anxiety's stronger correlations (relative to avoidance) with incivility and burnout may reflect their distinct qualities in the social context of healthcare work. Attachment anxiety motivates people toward close relationships despite their inherent risks, such as humiliation and unreasonable demands. For those high on attachment anxiety, these strains are preferable to fear of rejection. A cost of this trade-off is that anxious people have more social encounters that they consider uncivil. If they are more intensely involved in the workflow on their units, which is characterized by ongoing communication exchanges in the highly team-oriented work patterns of contemporary healthcare, they may be more apt to view interactions as being uncivil, experience less trust, and report more burnout.

In contrast to attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance may have practical 'advantages' for employees lacking secure attachment qualities. By avoiding social contact with colleagues, they may reduce their overall rate of incivility. However, similar to those high in anxiety, those high in avoidance still experience lower workplace civility and trust. Attachment avoidance was not associated with greater risk for exhaustion and cynicism, but it was associated with lower efficacy. It may be that maintaining a social distance avoids some workplace demands that create burnout, but it also deprives them of some opportunities for significant workplace accomplishments. Future research must look at these issues in more detail and use a longitudinal design before making any conclusions about directionality.

#### 4.1. *Practical implications*

Having a greater understanding of attachment styles, and potential benefits and outcomes may have several implications for organizations. It may benefit managers to recognize their own attachment styles to help them perceive social events within their workgroups more accurately. Managers would also benefit from recognizing that an employees' interpretation of social events may differ from those of other employees and from those of the manager.

#### 4.2. *Limitations and future research*

The study is limited by its reliance on a single source of self-reported data from a cross-sectional questionnaire. The concern with common method bias is alleviated to some extent by a Harmon single factor test that found that only 23% of the variance across the items in the model could be attributed to a single factor. Another concern is that the response rate from staff members was low, limiting the extent to which the sample could be considered representative of the participating hospitals or the general population. The low participation rate reflected the study's focus on

first line managers, which reduced the motivation of non-managers to participate. However, the sample size of over 1600 healthcare providers produces sufficient power to explore the constructs in the model. Our explicit focus was on healthcare providers. However, future research should examine other workers to see if the patterns of relationships are similar and whether the scale is appropriate for those populations.

Another direction for future research is focusing on the stability of the construct of attachment at work over time and across settings. In light of the considerable amount of research on attachment styles pertaining to personal relationships, it would be informative to determine the extent to which attachment styles may differ in one's work and personal life. That is, perhaps some people may maintain an avoidant attachment style at work while having a secure attachment style in their personal relationships. Moreover, the quality of interactions at work—in terms of civility and incivility—may contribute to employees developing distinct attachment styles as work in contrast to their personal lives. These issues could be explored using longitudinal designs and by tracking social perceptions and experiences during the initial years of employment. In a parallel fashion, attachment styles may change following promotion from team member to management as their role expectations change at work.

Another important line of research is to examine the correspondence of attachment styles as measured by the SWAM with an existing measure of attachment styles in personal relationships. A longitudinal, repeated measures design could determine the extent to which both measures cover the same domain and the extent to which attachment styles at work comprise a different set of social cognitions and perceptions than do attachment styles in personal relationships. The relative stability of attachment style over time would be of interest, especially for people for whom major life events—promotion at work; a new romantic relationship in personal life—occur during the course of the study.

A conceptual issue requiring exploration is whether secure attachment style is adequately captured by the absence of avoidance and anxiety inclinations. A subscale comprising both positive and negatively worded items, such as the avoidance subscale of the SWAM, includes both active endorsement of avoidance implies that the desire for and rejection of close relationships at work define opposite poles on a continuum. A more far-reaching approach to the construct would include not only opposite terms but bring in additional elements beyond direct expressions of avoidance or anxiety. This type of analysis is necessarily theory-driven because bringing in elements other than anxiety and avoidance (or their direct opposites) redefines the construct to some extent.

Although we did not examine a moderating effect in the current study, attachment styles also may have a potential to impact employees' management of challenging social encounters. That is, attachment styles may influence the extent to which difficult social encounters produce strain or weaken employees' performance of their professional roles. With high levels of attachment anxiety, employees may be more likely to label a social exchange as uncivil and to experience distress in response to such an incident. Alternatively, avoidance attachment may allow employees a way to disengage from difficult situations. That is, the superficial nature of workplace relationships for employees with high levels of avoidance may reduce the emotional impact of a social encounter even when it is perceived as uncivil or disrespectful, such that they experience less burnout. Future research should address this issue.

Finally, a more ambitious research agenda is to explore interventions or training to help managers and team members accommodate a range of attachment styles at work. It seems likely that employees with attachment anxiety would prefer a different kind of supervisory relationship than would employees with secure or avoidant attachment styles. Managers' effectiveness could be

improved if they could identify employees' attachment style and adapt their supervisory behavior accordingly.

## 5. Conclusion

The biases in perception and behavior associated with attachment styles pertain to an important dimension of healthcare work in terms of collaborating with, and providing services to, people. Insecure attachment patterns have the potential for undermining employees' participation in teamwork with other providers and to establish therapeutic relationships with their service recipients. Based on our sample of healthcare providers, we found preliminary support for the measure of attachment styles at work. We found that employees who had high attachment anxiety tended to be more closely involved in work relationships. However, this closeness came at a cost because they also reported more strain when interacting with others. Our study provides support to show that attachment styles have the potential to contribute to models of workplace relationships and of occupational distress, and it provides a solid basis for continued research in this area. The contribution of attachment styles to a model of burnout based on workload and value congruence emphasizes the importance of considering employees' understanding of their social context. Many sectors of the contemporary work world require active and sophisticated modes of social interaction in the course of contacts with service recipients and colleagues. Models of burnout and work engagement will be more complete and effective when including the range of personal perspectives that employees bring to their social encounters at work.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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