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Linking secure attachment to commitment: trust in supervisors

Linking secure attachment to commitment

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387

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between a secure attachment style and affective commitment (AC) through the mediating roles of affective and cognitive trust in a direct supervisor.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was conducted using the questionnaire answers of 357 private sector employees in various occupations. The statistical analysis was based on structural equation modeling. A multiple mediation model enabled us to investigate the specific indirect effects of each mediator.

Findings – Results based on a model comparison showed that the employees' affective trust in their supervisor fully mediated the relationship between a secure attachment style and AC. However, cognitive trust had no significant mediating effect on relationships between a secure attachment style and AC.

Practical implications – Trust in supervisors should be monitored and supported during developmental interventions. Understanding the power of affective and cognitive trust in predicting attitudes can help shape more effective interventions to influence positive work attitudes, including AC.

Originality/value – The study sheds new light on the literature by linking individual attachment to organizational attachment as the mediating role of two forms of trust in a supervisor.

Keywords Affective commitment, Mediation, Secure attachment style, Trust in supervisor

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The concept of organizational commitment has gained prominent interest in organizational research. It has been defined as a psychological state that binds an employee to an organization. Of the three dimensions of organizational commitment (affective, normative, and continuance), affective commitment (AC) refers to the degree to which a person identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in an organization (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Since AC has been strongly linked to positive work-related behaviors (Meyer *et al.*, 2002), such as employee productivity, job satisfaction, and high organizational and employee performance ratings, many organizations are focussing their attention on enhancing AC. Though the influence of work-related variables (e.g. job challenge, role clarity) has explained some of the variance, fundamental individual attributes may also contribute to the manner in which individuals develop AC. For instance, Johnson and Chang (2006, p. 550) note that “some employees may be oriented toward specific types of commitment. In these cases, it may be easier for organizations to cultivate commitment by focusing on the specific type that fits with employees' personal characteristics.” In this regard, this paper focusses on a neglected link in the literature incorporating how an employee's attachment style and trust in a supervisor predict AC.

An individual's attachment style refers to the complex pattern of relating based on one's life history of interpersonal experiences (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Among attachment styles, secure attachment is characterized by the capacity to connect well and securely in relationships with others while having the capacity for autonomous action (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). Just as children need to feel secure enough in



their families, employees also need to feel secure enough in their organizations to work productively and persistently (Braun, 2011). Empirical studies also support trust in supervisor as a valuable predictor of important work outcomes, including commitment (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007). Interpersonal trust between an employee and a supervisor represents the level of confidence that an individual has in another person to act in a fair, predictable, and competent manner. This research focusses simultaneously on the secure attachment style of individuals as an individual characteristic and trust in their supervisor as work-related behavior.

As organizations benefit by having more committed employees who develop strong bonds to their employing organizations and willing to pursue extra-role behaviors, this study highlights the importance of attachment theory and suggests to use the premises of secure attachment perspective for understanding superior-subordinate relationships. Kahn and Kram (1994, p. 19) suggests that “an individual’s relationship with authority figures can be traced to their prior experiences, meaning that individuals are internally motivated to exhibit certain types of authority relationships in ways that repeat earlier learned patterns of perceptions and behaviors.” Thus, taking the attachment theory as the starting point, the current study contributes to the literature by first constituting an effort testing the mediating role of trust in one’s supervisor in a secure attachment style and an AC relationship. Second, we examined employees’ trust in supervisor in two forms (affective and cognitive) as the specific mediators, reasoning that a secure attachment style will aggravate or alleviate individuals’ propensity to trust in their supervisors and thus contribute to their AC. This paper uses the direct supervisor as the object of interpersonal trust assessment. More specifically, the referent for affective organizational commitment is the workplace, whereas the referent for interpersonal trust is the employee’s direct supervisor, who interacts directly with supervised employees.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 Attachment theory

Attachment theory, viewed as a life span of social development, is the collaborative work of Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) and Bowlby (1969). The theory proposes that a caregiver’s availability and responsiveness during a child’s early stages of life lead to a secure relationship between the child and the caregiver. That is, if the attachment figure is continuously and constantly sensitive and responsive to the child’s needs, a secure attachment style and a positive internal working model of the world (e.g. “Other people are dependable and trustworthy,” and “It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others”) develop. In contrast, if the attachment figure is not physically or emotionally available in times of need, the infant develops insecure attachment styles, as well as negative internal working models of the world (e.g. “Other people are not dependable and trustworthy,” and “I find it difficult to trust others completely”).

Following Bowlby’s studies and the extensions of Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) specifying three categories of attachment (secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent), attachment theory has become an important framework in understanding interpersonal processes in adulthood. Hazan and Shaver (1987), who first linked attachment theory to adult attachment, propose that adults could be categorized into three distinct attachment styles, secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent, just like infants. Following Hazan and Shaver’s three-category model, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) propose a four-category model (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful) based on Bowlby’s (1969) mental attachment models of self and others. Accordingly, securely attached individuals have positive models of both self and others. These individuals tend to consider themselves

worthy of love and to perceive other individuals as accepting and responsive. Those who have a positive model of others (low avoidance) but a negative model of the self are identified as preoccupied. They see themselves as unworthy of love and perceive others as accepting and responsive. On the other hand, dismissing avoidants have negative model of others but a positive model of themselves, viewing themselves as worthy but others as untrustworthy and rejecting. However, fearful avoidants have negative models of both themselves and others and view themselves as unworthy of love and other people as untrustworthy, rejecting, and unresponsive. For practical considerations, we have chosen to study only secure attachment styles in the current study as the largest percentage of the population (62 percent) has been found to be characterized by securely attached styles (Shalit *et al.*, 2010; Simmons *et al.*, 2009).

2.2 Secure attachment style and AC

AC is viewed as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Mowday *et al.*, 1982). It is an emotional attachment to the organization with which an employee identifies and feels good about and intends to continue working because the employee wants to (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Although Hazan and Shaver (1990) argue that secure attachment is associated with a secure orientation toward work, the literature regarding the relation between attachment styles and organizational commitment is scant and contradictory. Among those, Madanipour (2013) examines the effect of employee's attachment styles on work outcomes but the study fails to report significant direct and moderating effects of attachment styles on AC and organizational citizenship behavior. On the other hand, Schusterschitz *et al.* (2011) report positive correlations between insecure attachment styles and AC on a sample of 156 white collar employees, suggesting that as employees become more insecure their tendency to commit their organizations increase. Authors interpret this finding in such a way that insecure individuals might block interpersonal relations by becoming highly engaged at work, which leads them to affectively commit to their work.

On contrary, some scholars propose that attachment security is related with positive attitudes such as commitment and satisfaction with the organizations (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Neustadt and Furnham, 2006). Those scholars argue that becoming a committed member of an organization involves the exploration and reorganization of one's personal priorities. In most cases, it requires extensive communication, coordination, and negotiation with other members, while remembering their need for autonomy (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). In this regard, attachment security is associated with the acquisition and use of the necessary self-regulatory and interpersonal skills. Likewise, Neustadt and Furnham (2006) demonstrate a significant positive relationship between AC and secure attachment style in the workplace meaning that secure employees have more tendency to affectively commit and intend to remain in their organization. Additionally, the recent study by Scrima *et al.* (2014) examining the adult attachment in the workplace on a sample of British, French, and Italian employees, report significant correlations between adult attachment styles, AC and workplace attachment. The findings reveal that secure attachment is positively associated with AC on the whole sample. Nevertheless, in one correlational study, based on a sample of Israeli high-tech company workers' self-reports and supervisory ratings, indicates that insecurely attached employees experience problems in committing themselves to their organizations and demonstrating lower levels of prosocial behaviors (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). They argue that insecure individuals' deficits in self-regulation and interpersonal coordination create obstacles to their becoming committed members of their organization.

Despite the lack of definitive research, it seems reasonable to consider secure attachment and AC to be associated positively with each other, as secure attachment style shapes people's evaluation about work and is associated with developing close relationships, behaving supportively. Based upon the previous findings, we develop the hypothesis that secure attachment is assumed to influence positively AC.

Therefore we propose:

H1. Secure attachment positively relates to AC.

2.3 Attachment style and trust in one's supervisor

While there is no single definition of trust, McAllister (1995) defines interpersonal trust as an individual's belief in and willingness to act on the basis of the words, actions, and decisions of another. It is categorized into two components: affective trust and cognitive trust. The affective component reflects the emotional bonds between the parties that may cause the referent to demonstrate concern about one's own welfare and a feeling of benevolence. It is more emotional than rational and specifically grows over time into a meaningful workplace relationship between an employee and supervisor (Costigan *et al.*, 1998). The cognitive component refers to trust that is based on performance-relevant cognitions, such as competence, responsibility, and dependability (McAllister, 1995). Prior research demonstrates that attachment styles are important antecedents of interpersonal relationship quality (Collins and Read, 1990). In organizational settings, some of the propensity to trust could be explained by developing an understanding of earlier attachment styles (Harms, 2011). In line with this view, Braun (2011) has indicated that attachment has a profound affect and effect on the capacity to trust in and relate to others. The reason for this is explained in such a way that the attachment network provides, as with children, a secure base which allows individuals to connect healthily to others, organizations, and the society. It is also argued that the driving force of attachment orientation is the perception that others are worthy of trust and ability. Therefore, some scholars suggest that "trust in both supervisor and coworkers is almost by definition an outcome of attachment styles" (Harms, 2011, p. 289). Similarly, Kahn (1998) reports that individuals form different emotional attachments, depending on the quality of caregiving and support received in their key work relationships, including supervisory relationships.

Since securely attached individuals have positive images of themselves and positive expectations of others, they approach social interactions with confidence (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). They are characterized by internal regulatory mechanisms that allow individuals to be flexible and constructive in their interpersonal relationships (Simmons *et al.*, 2009). Adams (2004) and Simmons *et al.* (2009) report positive relationships between secure attachment and trust in supervisors and upper management. In other words, they argue that individuals who are securely attached are able to maintain a trusting relationship with their supervisors. Shalit *et al.* (2010) indicate that secure individuals tend to trust others and to appraise others and themselves in positive terms. A recent study by Frazier *et al.* (2014) relates a secure attachment style to trust in supervisors. They suggest that securely attached individuals routinely expect their supervisor to deliver on task deadlines and demonstrate competence at work and high levels of work ability with consistency and integrity, inspiring higher levels of trust from their employees. Additionally, Wöhrle *et al.* (2015) reveal that secure attachment style is significantly and positively related to all three forms workplace trust including trust in supervisor, trust in

organization, and trust in colleagues in a sample of Dutch workforce. Drawing upon those researches, the following hypotheses are developed:

H2. A secure attachment style positively relates to affective trust.

H3. A secure attachment style positively relates to cognitive trust.

Linking secure attachment to commitment

2.4 Trust and AC

Empirical work on the trust-commitment relationship demonstrates that trust has a direct and positive effect on AC (Bloemer *et al.*, 2013). Nyhan (1999) views trust as a critical factor in the development of sustainable, long-term relational exchanges between employees and supervisors within an organization. Supporting this definition, Nyhan's (1999) study across three public sector organizations reveals a positive relationship between trust in one's supervisor and AC. Similarly, Perry (2004) considers the relation between trust in one's supervisor and AC; however, he fails to report strong statistical correlations between the two representative variables.

Affective trust reflects an emotional attachment stemming from reciprocal interpersonal care and concern between individuals (McAllister, 1995). The relationship between affective trust in a supervisor and AC can be based on social exchange theory. Social exchange theory is defined as the "voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others" (Blau, 1964, p. 91). It involves the long-term exchange of favors and requires trusting others to reciprocate. In this sense, individuals might use their trust perceptions to regulate their involvement in social exchange relationships in accordance with their level of affective trust in their supervisors. That is, if affective trust occurs as a product of social exchange, then positive emotions generated by perceptions of care and concern might motivate them to continue reciprocating their relational exchanges and to commit to their organizations (Wang *et al.*, 2010). Thus, subordinates' affective trust in their supervisors becomes a launching point for social exchange supervisors, as well as a device for regulating their AC. Thus:

H4. Affective trust positively relates to AC.

Individuals' beliefs about their supervisor's competence, reliability, and dependability are accepted as the major element of cognitive trust (McAllister, 1995). It is an objective, and rational evaluation of the trustor concerning a target as being trustworthy. Since affective organizational commitment emphasizes the acceptance of organizational goals and values and a strong desire to associate with the organization (Mowday *et al.*, 1982), the relationship between cognitive trust in supervisor and AC seems reasonable. As individuals perceive that they are pursuing meaningful objects that are clearly led by their direct supervisor, they are more likely to develop high-cognitive trust, which enhances AC. For instance, Gilbert and Tang (1998) contend that trust should be perceived as a feeling of confidence in and support for a supervisor. When subordinates have higher levels of cognitive trust in their superior, they are more likely to judge their work experiences favorably, and accordingly, demonstrate higher levels of commitment to their organization (Zhu *et al.*, 2013). Hence, we propose:

H5. Cognitive trust positively relates to AC.

2.5 Mediating effects of affective and cognitive trust

Our general proposition is that an individual's attachment style influences AC through trust perceptions of the supervisor. The proposed model builds on prior research which argues that a secure attachment style is a distal variable that influences AC through the

mediating effects of cognitive and affective trust in one's supervisor. More specifically, securely attached individuals with a positive image of self and positive expectations of others will have strong tendencies to trust in their supervisors both affectively and cognitively, which in turn are positively associated with AC to the organization. When discussing the role of the secure attachment style in work life, Boatwright *et al.* (2010) and Shalit *et al.* (2010) report that secure individuals have higher preferences of relationship-oriented leaders who foster a supportive environment, empower employees, and maintain open communication to make employees feel comfortable, confident about themselves and their organizations. Thus, it might be assumed that those leaders may cause their employees to display behaviors and have attitudes associated with AC such as experiencing a deep involvement in their organizations, having a strong desire to pursue the aims of their organizations. Accordingly, secure individuals who anticipate that their superiors will be sensitive, supportive, and responsive increase their affective trust in their superiors and reciprocate their relationship by intensifying their efforts to affectively commit to their organization. Similarly, secure individuals who anticipate that their superiors will be competent, reliable, and dependable form a basis for cognitive trust and in turn enhance their desire to associate with their organization by accepting organizational goals and values.

The conceptual model leads to the following hypotheses:

H6. Affective trust mediates the relation between a secure attachment style and AC.

H7. Cognitive trust mediates the relation between a secure attachment style and AC.

The relationships implied by the hypotheses are illustrated in Figure 1.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study is a part of larger ongoing project. Participants comprised private sector white collar employees working in various organizations in different sectors such as insurance, manufacturing, and education in Ankara, Turkey. The multi-industry focus is intentional, since we believe that sampling diversity avoids contextual constraints associated with any particular organization type. A total of 450 survey packages were distributed through a professional survey organization, of these 372 were returned with a response rate of 82.6 percent. Among the returned 357 usable survey packages, 114 respondents were from insurance companies, 130 were from manufacturing firms and 113 of them were primary and secondary teachers working in two private schools. The final sample consisted of 357 cases with a 55.2 percent of women and with an age range of 25-63. The average tenure was 11.2 years and tenure with one's current supervisor was 5.2 years. To determine possible mean differences among the

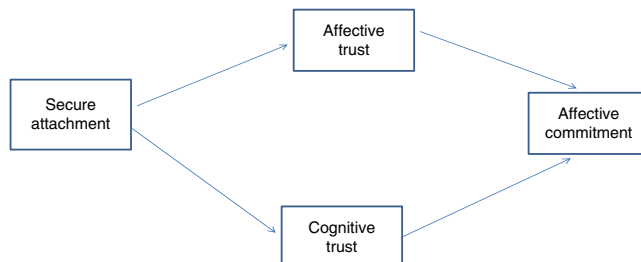


Figure 1.
Proposed model

participants in three sectors regarding trust and AC variables, ANOVA was conducted. The findings of ANOVA did not report any significant mean differences, suggesting that variation could not be attributed to sector differences.

3.2 Procedure

A sequential design was employed measuring different variables at successive occasions and specifying their corresponding effects on other variables at later occasions to reduce the impact of common method variance (CMV) (see MacCallum and Austin, 2000). Before data collection, the participants' informed consent was obtained indicating that they would be asked to participate in two data collection phases within a one-month period. At Time 1, respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire, which included questions about attachment style and interpersonal trust. One month later, we sent e-mails to these respondents to remind them to complete the Time 2 questionnaire, which included questions on the remaining measures of AC and demographic variables. Of the 450 self-administered Time 1 questionnaires, 372 were returned, with a response rate of 82.6 percent. At Time 2, the respondents ($n = 372$) participating in the first phase of the study were readministered the questionnaire; of these, 357 completed surveys were returned, with a response rate of 96.2 percent. The attrition rate was low (4.03 percent).

3.3 Measures

3.3.1 Relationship style questionnaire (RSQ). The secure attachment style of participants is evaluated with five items from Griffin and Bartholomew's (1994) (RSQ), on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all like me" to "very much like me." Sample item included "I find it easy to get emotionally close to others." Participants rated how well each item fit their characteristic style in close relationships. Average scores range between 1 and 7 indicating that higher scores represent higher levels of secure attachment style of the respondent.

The Turkish adaptation and validation of the RSQ instrument is conducted by Sümer and Güngör (1999). In their study, the Cronbach α coefficient of secure attachment style is reported as 0.59. As a result of psychometric evaluations, Turkish version of RSQ is found to have adequate convergent and construct validities. In the current study, the Cronbach α coefficient is 0.65. This finding is consistent with previous reports showing relatively low-internal consistency scores in both the adult and adolescent versions (0.41-0.71) for the RSQ subscales (see Griffin and Bartholomew, 1994; Ravitz *et al.*, 2010; Scharfe and Bartholomew, 1994). Despite lower Cronbach α reliabilities, scholars report that RSQ scale yielded adequate test-retest reliabilities for men and women samples (Griffin and Bartholomew, 1994).

3.3.2 Interpersonal trust. Trust is assessed using McAllister's (1995) instrument, worded in terms of supervisor. The instrument contains six items to assess cognitive trust (e.g. "My supervisor approaches his/her job with professionalism and dedication") and five items to assess affective trust (e.g. "We have a sharing relationship. We can both freely share our ideas, feelings, and hopes"). A five-point Likert-type scale evaluates the responses, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The Cronbach α coefficients for affective and cognitive trust are 0.87 and 0.86, respectively.

3.3.3 Affective commitment. We measured respondents' AC to their organization using six items adapted from Allen and Meyer's (1990) measure of organizational commitment. A sample item is "I really feel as if this organization's problems

are my own.” A seven-point Likert-type scale evaluates the responses ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree).

To diminish CMV (Chang *et al.*, 2010), we: first, collected data at two different points in time, as previously stated; second, used different response anchors for the predictor and outcome variables; third, manipulated the order of the questionnaire items; and fourth, used Harman’s single-factor test. Within the framework of Harman’s test, all items were entered together into a factor analysis and the results of the unrotated factor solution were examined. The analysis produced five factors, with the first factor explaining 28.4 percent of variances. As a result, no single factor accounted for a majority of the covariance and no general factor was apparent, suggesting that CMV is not a serious issue in this study (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table I lists the means and intercorrelations between variables. The correlations between variables provide initial support for our hypotheses. The demographic variables are not significantly correlated with any of the outcome variables, obviating their use as control variables.

4.2 Hypotheses testing

We first tested the measurement model by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and then structural models according to Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) recommendations. All the indexes were evaluated according to the recommendations of Byrne (2010).

4.2.1 Measurement model with CFA. Before conducting CFA with the maximum likelihood estimation, the data were screened for assumptions of CFA. For normality assumptions, outliers and univariate distributions were scanned for skewness and kurtosis scores and found within reasonable ranges (between -2 and +2). In addition to those, multivariate normality is inspected with Mardia’s coefficient of value of Kurtosis. As a result no violations for multivariate normality is detected.

For interpersonal trust items, the unidimensional model did not fit the data well ($\chi^2/df = 5.62$, GFI = 0.80, CFI = 0.86, TLI = 0.83, and RMSEA = 0.11). The two-factor model demonstrated an adequately acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.09$, GFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.95, and RMSEA = 0.08). Nested model comparisons also demonstrated the superiority of the two-factor model over a single-factor model,

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	–						
2. Age	-0.07	–					
3. Tenure	-0.11*	0.80**	–				
4. Aff. trust	0.01	-0.07	-0.04	<i>0.89</i>			
5. Cog. trust	0.07	0.12*	-0.07	0.59**	<i>0.90</i>		
6. Aff. commitment	0.03	0.08	0.08	0.49**	0.43**	0.88	
7. Secure attachment	-0.12*	-0.01	0.04	0.18**	0.04**	0.15**	0.63
Mean	–	–	–				
SD	–	–	–				

Table I.
Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of the study variables

Notes: Aff. trust, affective trust; Cog. trust, cognitive trust; and Aff. commitment, AC. Reliabilities are presented in italics, on the diagonal; Gender is coded as zero for men and one for women. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

producing a $\Delta\chi^2$ value of 53.4 ($p < 0.01$). Thus, we concluded that items loaded on their respective latent variables of affective and cognitive trust.

For the attachment measure, a unidimensional measurement model of secure attachment provided a good fit to the data after covariance terms were added between items 2 and 5 ($\chi^2/df = 1.01$, GFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.86, and RMSEA = 0.05). All of the five estimated loadings were significant.

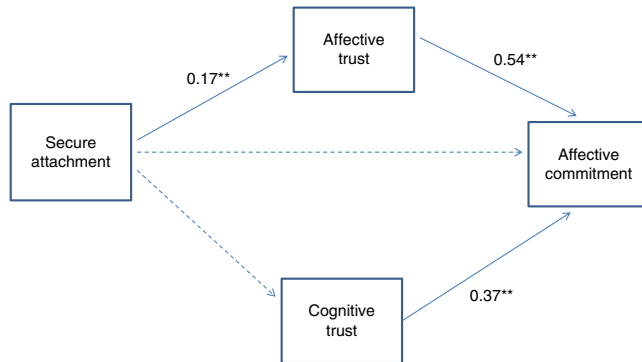
The six items assigned for measuring AC were averaged to create a single index capturing AC. Conducting CFA reveals that the scale fitted the data adequately ($\chi^2/df = 0.11$, GFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, and RMSEA = 0.02) with all significant item loadings.

4.2.2 Structural model. To test the hypothesized mediating effects of the trust variables (Figure 1), we ran a series of structural models based on the mediational logic of Baron and Kenny (1986) and Preacher and Hayes (2004). In Model 1 (direct effects), we tested a significant direct path coefficient from secure attachment style (IV) to AC (DV). In Model 2 (the fully mediated model), depicted in Figure 1, we included paths from a secure attachment style to trust mediators, as well as paths from trust mediators to AC, with significant path coefficients. In Model 3, a more parsimonious model, we modified Model 2 by removing statistically nonsignificant paths. Model 4 (partially mediated) is identical to Model 3, except for the inclusion of the direct effect paths from a secure attachment style to AC.

In Model 1, the path coefficient from secure attachment to AC was significant (0.24, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, *H1* is supported. When we ran Model 2 (full mediation), the structural path parameters indicated that the path from a secure attachment style to cognitive trust was nonsignificant, in contrast to *H3*. Then, we modified the model by deleting the nonsignificant path, as suggested by Byrne (2010). The revised model yielded a better fit to the data, with $\chi^2(df = 3) = 162.2$, $p < 0.05$, GFI = 0.84, CFI = 0.61, TLI = 0.64, and RMSEA = 0.13. Investigation of the modification indices suggested adding an error covariance between the variables of cognitive and affective trust. Since the theory suggests that both trust variables can covary, we allowed them to be correlated in the structural analyses. After a correlation term was added, the fit indices of the model improved substantially, with $\chi^2(df = 2) = 3.18$, $p > 0.05$, GFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, and RMSEA = 0.04. Examination of the parameter estimates indicated significant path coefficients from secure attachment to affective trust (0.17, $p < 0.05$), from affective trust to AC (0.54, $p < 0.01$), and from cognitive trust to AC (0.34, $p < 0.01$), lending support for *H2*, *H4*, and *H5*, respectively.

Finally, we examined the partial mediation model (Model 4), in which a direct path from secure attachment to AC was estimated, in addition to Model 3. In Model 4, all of the significant pattern relationships we found previously remained the same, but the new additional path from secure attachment to AC turned out to be nonsignificant. A χ^2 test was not significant and the fit indices suggested were $\chi^2(df = 1) = 0.461$, $p > 0.05$, GFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, and RMSEA = 0.03. The nested model comparison of Models 3 and 4 yielded a nonsignificant $\Delta\chi^2$ value of 2.71 ($df = 1$, $p < 0.01$), favoring Model 3, which is, the full mediating effect of affective trust with no direct relationship between secure attachment and AC. Our final model is shown in Figure 2. The results did not support a mediating role for cognitive trust (*H7*) in the relationship between secure attachment and AC but demonstrate support for the full mediating role of affective trust (*H6*) in the relationship between secure attachment style and AC.

Figure 2.
The final model



Notes: The dotted lines denote nonsignificant paths. Standardized estimates are reported and ** $p < 0.001$

5. Discussion

This study seeks to examine an integrative model of the relationship between secure attachment and AC, considering cognitive trust and affective trust in supervisor as the mediating variables.

5.1 Direct effects

In terms of direct effects, as predicted we found secure attachment was positively related to AC. In the line with the previous studies (Neustadt and Furnham, 2006; Scrima *et al.*, 2014), individuals who are securely attached are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward the organization and intend to remain in their organizations. Moreover, our findings revealed employees' secure attachment style to be a primary source of affective trust in their supervisor. It seems that attachment theory provides us with a conceptual framework for classifying employees on their tendencies to form different emotional relationships with their superiors. That is, employees who are securely attached are more likely to have high-dispositional tendencies to trust in their supervisors affectively. This result is congruent with the findings of Adams (2004), Shalit *et al.* (2010), and Simmons *et al.* (2009), who postulate positive relationships between secure attachment and trust in supervisors. More clearly, through consistent, responsive, and sensitive interactions with significant others in childhood, a secure attachment bond develops. Later, in work settings, this attachment bond then becomes related with affective trust in supervisor, which is characterized by one's emotions concerning the other party's perceived trustworthiness.

In contrast to our expectations, we failed to confirm our proposition associating between secure attachment style and cognitive trust in supervisor. It seems that compared to cognitive trust, a secure attachment style accounts for significant variance in affective trust, as responsiveness to the needs of partners provides an appropriate standard for affective trust. Nevertheless, this finding could be given particular emphasis in the framework of a cultural context, where establishment of highly personalized relationship is a necessary precondition for working with others in collectivistic cultures (Wasti *et al.*, 2011). In this regard, trust development between leaders and their followers is unlikely to be explained by cognitive factors such as competence, integrity, and trustworthiness alone. Alternatively,

in a statistical sense, this might be partly due to the moderately high correlation between two trust variables.

The findings of the current study regarding the direct effects of both the affective and cognitive trust dimensions on AC are also consistent with the literature (Bloemer *et al.*, 2013; Nyhan, 1999; Perry, 2004). That is, employees who perceive their supervisory trust relationships as affective – in the form of caring, natural, emotional, and as cognitive – in the form of competence and reliability – are more likely to have positive attitudes toward their organization.

Linking secure attachment to commitment

397

5.2 Mediating effects of trust dimensions

Taken together, the results of the study reveal that the fully mediated model yielded the best fit to the data. This finding informs the potential role of affective trust in supervisors in enhancing organizational commitment. That is, an individual's secure attachment is expected to act as a dispositional variable, triggering levels of affective trust in supervisor, and in turn, manifesting itself as a positive attitude in the form of AC. Thus, securely attached individuals might pay more attention to the development of a high-quality relationship with their supervisors. A trusted supervisor can provide meaningful interpretations of organizational intent and reassurance that positive work attitudes could develop (Perry, 2004). Such an understanding can serve as a means of maintaining and developing affective trust. Moreover, as previously noted, social exchange relationships involve the reciprocation of benefits (Blau, 1964). So it seems reasonable that secure individuals who perceive that they are cared about by their supervisor will be more likely to trust in their supervisor and reciprocate by affectively committing to their organizations.

Although the direct effect of cognitive trust in supervisor on AC was found to be significant, the mediating effect of cognitive trust on the linkage between secure attachment and commitment could not be verified. This finding is congruent with the findings of Colquitt *et al.* (2012) and Yang *et al.* (2009), who emphasize that the notion of affective trust, compared to cognitive trust, is more closely linked to social exchange formulations and more likely to be an important mediator in exchange relationships (Zhu *et al.*, 2013).

Another plausible explanation might be that secure individuals may not develop cognitive trust due to the distinct predictors of cognitive and affective trust. It has been argued that the development of cognitive trust is largely a matter of the perceived characteristics of another party (Morrow *et al.*, 2004) and based on more observable behaviors. Since secure adults with trusting foundations are characterized by flexible and mutual benevolence in relationships, relative to cognitive trust, it seems that affective trust is more powerful and salient throughout all stages of a relationship (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991).

5.3 Practical implications

In today's post-modern organizations, organizational commitment is significantly decreasing, thereby increasing insecurity. In this case, the lack of reciprocity in commitment makes it difficult for employees to trust in managers, organizations and emotionally attach to organizations as well as its members. Those issues may highlight the significance of secure attachment style, trust in supervisor, and committing to the organization (Braun, 2011).

The findings of the current study offer several implications. They highlight the role of affective trust in supervisors as an important mechanism that translates secure

attachment into positive work outcomes. In the private sector, where commitment to an organization has been interpreted as a means of ensuring productivity, stability, and competitiveness, organizations might utilize avenues to increase the AC of their employees. In this respect, managers should focus their attention on developing social exchange relationships through the cultivation of emotional bonds with their subordinates, which, in turn, will lead the employees to develop affective trust in their supervisor and commit to the organizations. Several strategies could be addressed by managers, including understanding and stimulating communications in employee-supervisor dyads (Zhu *et al.*, 2013), supporting employees individually, demonstrating concern for them, and being sensitive to individual needs.

As the attachment theory seems to be a universal feature of human relationships that occurs across various kinds of diversity (Pistole, 1997), using attachment perspective in work life might have some advantageous. In this regard, the current study provides encouraging evidence that some employees with securely attached are more vulnerable to affectively trust in their superiors and consequently contribute to commit their organizations. It can be interpreted that individuals who develop permanent affective bonds to their primary caregivers, may also develop permanent affective bonds to their organizations (Clair, 2000). Drawing on the attachment bonds of the employees, from a human resources perspective, organizations might indulge employing secure employees and integrating attachment orientations in their selection and placement procedures (Schusterschitz *et al.*, 2011; Tziner *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, secure individuals who perceive that their supervisor's intentions toward them are benevolent would be more positive about their future expectations and become affectively committed to their organizations (Lapointe *et al.*, 2014).

5.4 Limitations and future research

This research is not without its limitations. One limitation pertains to the use of self-reported measures, raising concerns such as a social desirability effect and CMV. Although several techniques were applied to diminish the potential for CMV (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986), the threat of inflating variances might still be a concern. Replications with prospective data could be helpful to assess the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the correlational nature of the relationship between the variables does not infer causality which can only be established through longitudinal replications.

The issue of dyad or partner effects is another limitation. The secure attachment orientation of employees is assessed via self-reports and is then compared with some important outcomes. Some scholars (Frazier *et al.*, 2014) suggest that the attachment styles of both members of the dyad need to be taken into account. Nevertheless, regarding attachment measures, Banai *et al.* (1998) provide evidence of a high accordance between self-ratings and other ratings of attachment.

This study also offers several future research possibilities. One such avenue is to consider both secure and insecure attachment styles, as well as the remaining dimensions of organizational commitment. This would shed light on the question of which attachment style becomes more important in continuance and normative commitment. Another opportunity is investigation of the ways in which a supervisor's attachment orientation affects trust in the supervisor-employee relationship, and in turn, how it relates to organizational outcomes (Frazier *et al.*, 2014).

Although the correlational nature of the current study does not assert causality the findings will garner sufficient interest among scholars and practitioners in order to

generate further explanations of attachment orientations at work. In other words, despite its limitations, the present study expands the literature by showing that secure attachment enhances the capacity to affectively trust in supervisor and which in turn increases their tendency to stay within their organization. Thereby, using attachment lens in thinking about organizations and superior-subordinate relationship could help us show progress in the interventions of today's organizations.

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