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## **Power of Attachment Styles in Servant Leadership: *A Conceptual Paper***

### **Abstract**

*The paper aims to advance an understanding of the relationship between servant leadership and attachment styles. This paper provides a review of servant leadership and attachment styles to explain how this understanding can be used to confront challenges faced by leaders due to a crisis. A proposed conceptual model is posited to investigate the moderating effect of followers' attachment styles on the relationship between servant leadership and desired follower outcomes. Additionally, this study adds support to the criticism of the leader-centric approach of research by investigating the moderating role of followers' characteristics, such as followers' attachment styles. The practical implications of this study highlight how servant leadership can positively revolutionise relationships at work, thereby making it an interesting field for research and practice.*

### **Introduction**

The need for leadership arises out of the desire of organisations to accomplish their objectives in the most effective way. Organisations need effective leaders “to plan, organise, provide direction, and exercise control over organisational resources, material, and human, in order to achieve the organisation’s objectives” (Kanungo, 2001, p.257).

Abusive supervision is the “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which superiors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000. p.178) is a pervasive issue in workplaces today. Some major characteristic behaviours include invasion of privacy, inappropriately assigning blame, ridiculing publicly, rudeness, and taking undue credit (Tepper et al., 2006). Research has found abusive supervision is associated with lower employee job satisfaction, lower life satisfaction, lower normative and affective commitment, higher family-to-work conflict, higher employee depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Tepper, 2000).

An employee’s view on what accounts for good leadership has dramatically changed. The idea of a hierarchical-oriented heroic leader with primary regard to shareholders needs to be replaced with leadership that is both virtuous and ethical, a leadership that prioritises altruism, humility, ethical behaviour, and agape love through service to other people (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010). Servant Leadership might be able to deal with the challenges of our modern-day workplace, which may be the reason why organisations that implement servant leadership continue to rise (e.g., Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, Container Store, Zappos), thus encouraging more research into Servant Leadership (Eva et al., 2019).

In a systematic review and call for future research which surveyed servant leadership and devised a nomological network of servant leadership research to understand the antecedents, mediators, moderators, outcomes, and boundary conditions to create a holistic picture of where it has been and where it should go in the future (Eva et al., 2019). However, attachment styles were exempted from their paper. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1977) suggests that humans have a survival need to form strong affectionate bonds with significant others who can provide security to them. Although the significance of servant leadership has been discussed in scholarly literature and displayed through empirical research. The gap lies in understanding the role of attachment styles in servant leadership. In this paper, I attempt to address this gap by reviewing servant leadership literature and attachment styles. I will then provide propositions of a servant leader possessing a certain attachment style. Thereafter, I offer a conceptual model that captures the moderating role of followers' attachment styles on the relationship between servant leadership and desired follower outcomes and propose future research directions.

## **Servant Leadership**

Servant Leadership is “an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership, (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritising of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organisation and the larger community” (Eva et al., 2019, p.114). It was in his seminal work, Greenleaf (1977, pp. 13-14) described servant leadership as: “The servant-leader is servant first ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become wealthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

The rise of servant leadership research is prominent (Eva et al., 2019). Studies have shown it to be imperative in terms of gratitude, empowerment, innovativeness, and performance in organisations (Baykal et al., 2018). It also has a positive relationship with team effectiveness, organisational citizenship behaviour (Mahembe et al., 2014), and work engagement (Yang et al., 2017). It has been found to negatively affect turnover intention (Brohi et al., 2018).

In their meta-analytic study, Hoch et al. (2018) examined and compared transformational, ethical, authentic, and servant leadership. Their findings showed that servant leadership predicts outcomes related to organisations and explains variance above and beyond the other leadership approaches. They concluded that servant leadership has “much more promise as a stand-alone leadership” (p. 2) than the rest.

## **Attachment Theory**

Considered one of the most influential theories in psychology and an established theory of human relationships (Finkel & Simpson, 2015), it posits the experiences a child has with an attachment figure (most often parents) form the basis of an internal working model of self. According to *attachment theory*, the internal working model of self can be either secure (wherein both others and self are perceived positively) or insecure (wherein both others and self are perceived negatively). Through these mental models, people examine the behaviour of significant others with whom they interact. The central concern is the cognitive-affective process of attachment which is defined as the propensity of a human to develop affectional bonds with significant others (Bowlby, 1969).

Bowlby (1969, 1988) is credited with having developed *attachment theory* to explain the affectional bonds children form with their primary caregivers. According to Bowlby, a child

who consistently observes their primary caregiver providing for their basic physiological and emotional needs will develop a secure model of attachment, whereas a child who observes their primary caregiver not meeting their needs may form an insecure model of attachment. The theory postulates that individuals during times of need and distress are born with an innate desire to seek proximity to others to increase their survival prospects. The extent to which these successful efforts lead to a sense of security. This then becomes the basis of one's attachment style, which remains relatively fixed over one's lifespan. Though this theory was initially developed to explain a parent-child relationship, it has been extended to other human relationships.

These attachment models were further explored through "The Strange Situation" studies. These studies stimulated stress in parent-child dyads and observed their patterns of interaction. The studies had the following steps, first, the researcher would introduce the infant and the caregiver to a room with new objects to play with, following which they then left the infant to explore the room with the caregiver present. Patterns of behaviour were observed in the following situations: (1) when the caregiver was present, and a stranger entered the room, (2) when the caregiver left the room, and the child was alone with the stranger, (3) the caregiver came back to the room, and the stranger left, (4) no one was present in the room except for the infant, (5) the stranger returned, and (6) the stranger leaves, and the caregiver returns. By coding these observations, they developed a model consisting of three different types of attachment styles: secure, ambivalent, and avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

These three models remain stable over time and summarised a secure individual's internal working model as basic trust and confidence that their caretaker will be helpful, available, consistent, and responsive in threatening situations (Cassidy, 1994). Securely attached infants showed signs of distress when the caregiver left and relief when they returned. They maintained a sense of proximity to the "safe haven" of the caregiver, especially in the stranger's presence. Thus, they are bold in their explorations of the world and are associated with increased levels of optimism, positive views of others, and self and emotional stability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015).

A sense of uncertainty characterises an insecure ambivalent attachment style that the caregiver will be helpful, available, and responsive when called to (the caregiver is available and helpful in some situations but not in others). These infants showed major distress in the caregiver's absence, feared the stranger, and resisted the caregiver when they returned (Cassidy, 1994). Insecure ambivalent is "the extent to which a person worries that others will not be available in times of need and anxiously seeks their love and care" (p.18). Because of this uncertainty, it results in higher proneness to separation anxiety, negative self-perception, and lower levels of emotion regulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015).

The third pattern is insecure avoidant attachment, wherein individuals are not confident that they will receive care when they seek it. In turn, they strongly expect to be rebuffed. They tend to devalue the value of attachment and attempt to minimise attachment behaviour by becoming emotionally self-sufficient and try to live without others' support. This may result from the caregiver consistently rebuffing the child when they approach for a sense of protection or comfort. These infants showed little distress in the absence of their caregiver and little interest when they arrived, and they were indifferent to the caregiver. An insecure avoidant attachment style is the extent to which a person distrusts others' goodwill and defensively strives to maintain behavioural and emotional independence. Thus, it is associated with actively trying to handle distress solo, no

attempts to seek proximity and support, and a negative perception of other people (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2015).

The avoidant attachment style can be further divided into: “fearful,” which includes characteristics such as discomfort and distress because of the lack of close relationships, and “dismissing,” characterised by discomfort with closeness and intimacy and a denial of attachment-related anxiety. The model has two dimensions: perception of others and perception of self. Each of the dimensions can have a positive or negative value. Securely attached individuals have a positive model of self and others. Ambivalent individuals have a negative model of self but still approach others in terms of comfort, indicating a positive model of others. Fearful individuals have a negative model of both self and others. Dismissing adults have a positive self-model, however, they do not wish to have close relationships, thus indicating a negative model of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Research has found that individuals who exhibit secure attachment in adulthood consistently enjoyed responsive and attentive caregiving as children. In contrast, those adults who exhibit an insecure attachment style tended to experience inconsistent (ambivalent/fearful) or dismissive (avoidant) caregiving as a child (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

In adult life, studies done by Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1990) in the context of emotional relationships such as romantic relationships and in the workplace found that securely attached individuals as being comfortable with closeness, have a positive sense of trust, worthiness, and an expectation that others are accepting and will be supportive of them in times of distress. Insecure avoidant individuals are reluctant to trust and prefer maintaining an emotional distance. Their findings led to an impetus for future research.

## **Attachment Theory and Leadership**

According to several researchers, the relationship between a leader-follower dyad is similar in critical ways to a child-parent (primary caregiver).

Popper et al. (2000) expanded attachment style to the area of leadership, their central hypothesis was that the transformational leadership style would positively correlate with the secure attachment style. Their findings showed positive associations between leaders' secure and multiple sources of transformational-leadership ratings. Transformational leadership can negatively impact attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Molero et al., 2013). Similar studies were done with other leadership theories, such as authentic leadership theory (Hinojosa et al., 2014) and leader-member exchange theory (Fein et al., 2020). Securely attached individuals perceived themselves as more effective team members and that their fellow team members saw them as emerging leaders significantly more than how they perceived insecurely attached individuals (Berson et al., 2006)

Attachment theory posits a tendency of the internal working models to resist change based on the assumption that they often operate outside conscious awareness, however, despite this tendency of continuity in attachment patterns, certain changes may occur (Bowlby, 1988). For instance, when critical changes occur in the parent (primary caregiver) (Egeland & Farber, 1984) or due to a supportive relationship with a significant other, friend, or even a therapist (Bowlby, 1988; Lieberman et al., 1991; Van Ijzendoorn et al., 1995). Harms' (2011) study specifically focused on individual differences in attachment styles regarding workplace outcomes such as trust, job attitudes, and leader effectiveness. Besides the tendency to perceive leaders as attachment figures, leadership research has also shown relationships to be the foundation of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2011).

Secure attachment is associated with a relational leadership style (expressing greater concern over the development of employees) as opposed to a task leadership style (focused more on rewards and recognition), whereas insecure avoidant attachment is associated with task-oriented leadership (Doverspike et al., 1997). Securely attached leaders were more like to delegate, and avoidant leaders reported the least delegation (Johnston, 2000). Researchers have also argued that certain features of secure attachment (empathic ability and self-confidence) are pivotal to visionary leadership (Goleman et al., 2002). Securely attached individuals (higher capacity for emotional regulation) are more likely to promote positive emotions, encourage followers' creativity, be altruistic, and put the need of others before their own (Sosik and Megarian, 1999).

The antecedents of leadership in terms of attachment are based on the idea that attachment relationships are formed with individuals that one is close to, who, in times of stress, can provide a safe haven, and who can be relied on to encourage and support new experiences and exploration. Eva et al. (2019), in their systematic review of the antecedents of servant leadership, do not include attachment styles.

There are certain themes in servant leadership (*Table 1*). Overall, a servant leader shows a keen interest in loving and serving the followers, I contend that the servant leader must have both a positive model of self and a positive model of others therefore, I propose:

- **Proposition 1:** *There is a positive association between servant leadership and a secure attachment style.*
- **Proposition 2:** *There is a negative association between servant leadership and an insecure attachment style.*

**Table 1: Past Dominant Themes of Servant Leadership**

<b>Graham (1991)</b>	<b>Spears (1996)</b>	<b>Farling et al. (1999)</b>	<b>Laub (1999)</b>	<b>Russell &amp; Stone (2000)</b>	<b>Barbuto &amp; Wheeler (2006)</b>
Inspirational	Listening	Service	Values People	Vision	Organisational Stewardship
Moral	Empathy	Vision	Builds Community	Credibility	Altruistic Calling
	Healing	Credibility	Displays Authenticity	Trust	Emotional Healing
	Awareness	Trust	Provides Leadership	Service	Wisdom
	Persuasion	Influence	Develops People	Modeling	Persuasive Mapping
	Conceptualization			Pioneering	
	Foresight			Appreciation of others	
	Stewardship			Empowerment	
	Growth				
	Community Building				

<b>Patterson (2003)</b>	<b>Dennis &amp; Bocarnea (2005)</b>	<b>Liden et al. (2008)</b>	<b>Sendjaya et al. (2008)</b>	<b>Van Dierendonck &amp; Nuijten (2011)</b>
Service	Humility	Putting Subordinates First	Voluntary Subordination	Stewardship
Vision	Agapao Love	Behaving Ethically	Responsible Morality	Humility
Humility	Trust	Emotional Healing	Authentic Self	Authenticity
Trust	Vision	Conceptual Skills	Transcendental Spirituality	Forgiveness
Altruism	Empowerment	Empowering	Convental Relationship	Accountability
Agapao Love		Helping subordinates grow and succeed	Transforming Influence	Courage
				Empowerment

## **Servant Leadership and Follower Outcomes**

Eva et al. (2019), in their systematic review on Servant Leadership, have analysed several empirical findings of the group, organisation-level outcomes, and how servant leaders influence follower outcomes.

They dissected it into follower behavioural outcomes such as the positive relationship between servant leadership and organisational citizenship behaviour (Chen et al., 2015; Liden et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2016), helping behaviour (Neubert et al., 2016), self-rated employee corporate social responsibility (Grisaffe et al., 2016), and proactive behaviour (Bande et al., 2016). It has also been negatively associated with employee deviance (Sendjaya et al., 2018).

And follower attitudinal outcomes such as employee engagement (Van Dierendonck et al., 2014), thriving at the workplace (Walumbwa et al., 2018), job satisfaction (Mayer et al., 2008), and psychological well-being (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Servant Leadership is negatively associated with turnover intention (Hunter et al., 2013), ego depletion and emotional exhaustion (Rivkin et al., 2014), job cynicism (Bobbio et al., 2012), and job boredom (Walumbwa et al., 2018). An emerging body of research shows servant leadership is positively associated with employees' perception of work-life balance and family support (Tang et al., 2016) and reducing work-family conflict (Zhang et al., 2012). Research findings have also found employees in the presence of servant leaders are likely to view their organisation positively-higher levels of organisational identification (Zhao et al., 2016), increased levels of perceived person-organisation fit (Irving & Berndt, 2017), and person-job fit (Babakus et al., 2010). Servant leadership has also been positively related to commitment to change (Kool & Van Dierendonck, 2012) and organisational commitment (Miao et al., 2014).

In terms of performance outcomes, a positive relationship has been found between employees (Liden et al., 2008), teams (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2016), and organisational performance (Choudhary et al., 2013). Servant leadership is also positively associated with innovation-oriented outcomes (Panaccio et al., 2015) and employee knowledge-sharing (Luu, 2016). Kiker et al. (2019) explored the main effects of servant leadership on organizationally relevant outcomes such as job performance, organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), job satisfaction, commitment, and trust.

## Attachment Styles as a Moderating Role

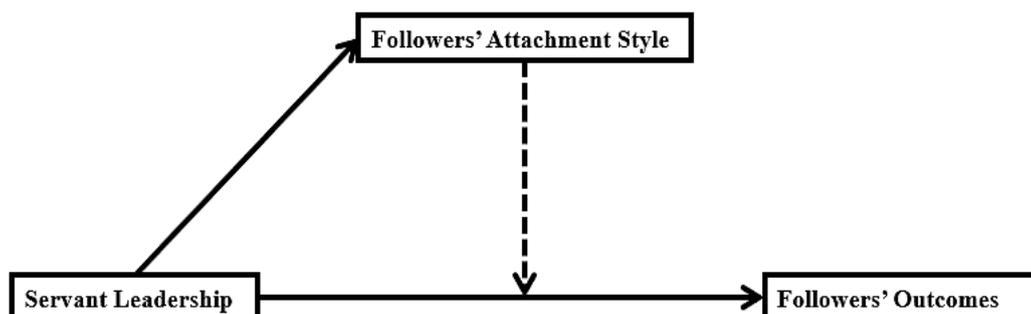
Leadership research has been criticised for being very leader-centric (Meindl, 1995). Lord et al. (1999) postulated that the “follower remains an unexplored source of variance in understanding leadership processes.” However, the perception and preference for certain leadership styles are influenced by follower characteristics. Shalit et al. (2010) found followers with a secure attachment style would prefer “socialized” charismatic leaders who were focused on teamwork, collaboration, and development of their people, while followers with an avoidant attachment style preferred “personalized” charismatic leaders who were task-oriented, achievement-driven, and displayed narcissism and self-aggrandisement.

In times of stress, the activation of the attachment system in followers can result in insecure avoidant attachment individuals distancing themselves from leaders, resulting in being counterproductive to work and less likely to trust their leaders (Harms et al., 2016). Followers with an avoidant attachment style may be resistant to leadership due to their prior experiences with unsupportive relationships, and attachment styles can shape how followers evaluate their leaders’ behaviour (Keller, 2003). However, securely attached individuals are more likely to see their leaders’ intentions as benevolent and trusting (Frazier et al., 2015).

Therefore, I propose followers with a secure attachment style will prefer close and intimate relationships with their leader, while those with an avoidant attachment style will prefer distant and more impersonal relationships. Securely attached followers will derive benefits from servant leadership, while insecure-avoidant followers will experience discomfort with servant leaders, which will negatively impact them when others wish to get emotionally close to them.

- **Proposition 3:** *The positive relationship between servant leadership and follower outcomes will be moderated by follower attachment styles such that the relationship will be stronger when followers have a secure attachment style and weaker when followers have an insecure-avoidant attachment style.*

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**



## Servant Leadership and Attachment Security After the Crisis

Transference of attachment to non-parental figures is more likely to occur when one has de-idealised or cannot rely on their original attachment figures, especially in critical situations with increased stress (Mayseless & Popper, 2007). Following the assumptions of attachment theory, followers’ need for safety and security gets activated during a crisis, for instance, the coronavirus pandemic in the leader-follower relationship (Steele, 2020).

Servant leadership moderates the negative effect of mortality salience which COVID-19 triggered on job engagement via state anxiety, and the relationship between job engagement and state anxiety became higher when servant leadership was higher (Hu et al., 2020).

The attachment theory literature proposes the concepts of “safe haven,” “proximity seeking,” “separation distress,” and “secure base” (Bowlby, 1969) – also present and essential in leader-follower relationships (Molero et al., 2019). However, the difference is in the way it is implemented.

Applying servant leadership attributes: agapao love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service (Patterson, 2003) to the concepts of attachment security, a servant leader can act as a “safe haven” by providing consistent support and comfort through frequent contact and service. A servant leader can act as a “secure base” by empowering employees while supporting assistance in exploration towards their goal-achievement. “Separation distress” can occur in the absence of the servant leader during long or unwanted separation. Lastly, “proximity seeking” can be in terms of both physical and emotional proximity seeking. If the servant leader remains humble and empathetic and consistently responds in a supportive manner, this reinforces attachment security in the relationship.

Research has explored the differing variations in attachment and leadership styles in times of crisis. For example, a study found that securely attached individuals are more likely to use support-seeking strategies for coping, whereas insecure-avoidant attached individuals use more distancing strategies (Mikulincer et al., 1993). Likewise, Richards and Schat (2007) found secure individuals were more likely to engage in support-seeking behaviours, while avoidant attached individuals were significantly less likely to seek support. While a servant leader may have developed attachment security with followers before the pandemic, the current crisis can test this relationship. Servant leaders have the opportunity to foster or hamper attachment security during this adaptive period.

Based upon these arguments, I contend:

- **Proposition 4: *Securely attached followers are more likely to be receptive to servant leaders to foster attachment security***
- **Proposition 5: *Insecurely avoidant attached followers are less likely to be receptive to servant leaders to foster attachment security***

## **Limitations**

The paper solely focuses on servant leadership. However, multiple leadership approaches have been shown to influence organisations positively. Thus, to strengthen the study, other leadership styles and follower characteristics should be analysed to understand which leadership styles evoke the highest levels of employee job outcomes and to what extent the unique predictive power of servant leadership.

It considers only the positive aspects of servant leadership, future research should explore other situations where servant leadership will not benefit leaders, employees, and organisations. For example, an employee's preference for a particular leadership style may significantly impact the perception of a servant leader. An incongruence between an employee's comfort level or preference can also lead to negative follower outcomes such as decreased performance, satisfaction, motivation, organisational citizenship behaviour, and increased turnover. The nature of the job can also affect the relationship between the variables.

## Implications and Future Research

The paper can address timely and practical implications. It addresses the need for developing socially and ethically responsible leaders, especially in this crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. It provides an integrated understanding of servant leadership and attachment styles, which will prove useful for educators and consultants. First, understanding the individual characteristics that enable or constrain servant leadership behaviour provides implications for leaders as it emphasises the need for them to alter their leadership style depending on their follower's attachment styles which can be assessed as part of their hiring and evaluation. Additionally, by understanding the impact on followers' outcomes, organisations would be able to examine and develop an appropriate style that could lead to an overall beneficial environment.

In applying servant leadership and attachment theory to a crisis, many propositions and related interventions can also be applied to other uncertain crises that impact the leader-follower relationship. The paper offers a unique lens on attachment security within the servant leader-follower relationship during a disruptive, stressful time.

Future research should empirically test the propositions. Servant leaders drawing from attachment theory and research can implement several practical implications to foster attachment security in their followers and help them cope during the current crisis. Servant leaders who understand differing follower needs for attachment security will be better able to adapt their interactions with employees during crises. Future research can also explore other factors that influence the development process of servant leaders.

Measures can be used to identify attachment styles, and servant leaders can be measured. The study of attachment theory may benefit servant leaders, especially during such uncertain crisis situations for leader-follower relationships, leaders who adapt behaviours to their followers during times of crisis will help foster attachment security. This paper is a reminder of how to transform this massive challenge into meaningful growth.

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