interaction of work adjustment and attachment theory: employment counseling implications

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Career development is a lifelong process beginning with career choice. However, career choice alone does not guarantee career success. Rather than focus on choosing a career, the theory of work adjustment (TWA) focuses on the process of becoming an exemplary employee through each stage of an individual's career. Within TWA, employee relationships with peers and bosses create reputations that may help or hinder promotion. Understanding attachment theory in relation to TWA may help clients to become more successful in their career. Case examples explain how employment counselors may integrate TWA and attachment theory with clients.

Career development, a lifelong process, significantly contributes to an individual's identity, lifestyle, life satisfaction, and overall wellness. Early career development theories, such as trait and factor (Parsons, 1909), focused on the matching of the individual's needs to the world of work and how the person fit into the work environment. As early as 1956, Roe addressed the influence of childhood relationships to career behavior and choice. More current theories have focused on developmental stages, career decision as a systematic social learning process, and specific steps in the career decision-making process (Zunker, 2006). The ultimate goal of each of these theories is to guide the individual in choosing an appropriate career that is satisfying and provides success. However, simply choosing a career does not guarantee career success or personal satisfaction.

As Hershenson (1996) indicated, people spend more time working a job than choosing it, so making a career choice is just the beginning of a journey toward career success. From Burlew's (2006) perspective, workers can benefit from viewing career success as a day-to-day experience of working their jobs successfully, in which each day of successful work adds to a developing puzzle of an emerging work history of career success that can lead to successful work adjustment and career satisfaction. Anything influencing this developing puzzle, such as work adjustment issues or intra- or interpersonal variables, needs to be considered in helping clients become as successful as possible at work. The more immediate day-to-day work success experienced, the greater the potential for a worker's sense of overall career success.

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WORK ADJUSTMENT

Unlike many of the current career theories, the theory of work adjustment (TWA) relates to working a job successfully once an occupation is chosen. Blustein (2006) defined working using four factors: working is “a way to establish an identity; [contributes to] personal meaning; involves effort, activity, and human energy in given tasks; [and exists as] one of the constants in our lives” (p. 3). He reviewed Neff’s (1985) research regarding the five important factors that explain the amount of energy people invest in working: material needs, self-esteem, activity, respect by others, and need for creativity. Work, then, involves physical, social, and psychological needs, and helping workers meet these needs as successfully as possible is as important as choosing a career. Therefore, TWAs are instrumental to employment counselors for helping clients meet these needs.

René V. Dawis and Lloyd H. Lofquist were early proponents of the psychological nature of work adjustment, and from their research they developed TWA. Dawis and Lofquist (1984) defined work adjustment as a “continuous and dynamic process by which a worker seeks to achieve and maintain correspondence with a work environment” (p. 237). This correspondence is the reciprocal process between the worker’s satisfaction and the employer’s satisfactoriness (Eggerth, 2008; Zunker, 2006). A worker’s satisfaction relies on reinforcers or environmental variables (e.g., compensation, company policies, independence, security, or recognition) that meet a worker’s psychological needs (Degges-White & Shoffner, 2002). According to TWA, a worker’s satisfactoriness depends on the company’s perception that the worker demonstrates successful work behavior, fits in with the organizational culture, and meets the demands of the job. Eggerth (2008) claimed that the “most stable employment situations occur when both worker and employer are mutually satisfied” (p. 63). When this mutual satisfaction occurs, tenure and job satisfaction are more likely outcome variables for the worker.

Successful work adjustment is not easily attainable. In his Model of Work Adjustment, Hershenson (1996) included a subsystem that affects work success: work personality. Work personality includes self-concept, work motivation, and needs and values. When identifying successful workers with his Model of Organizational (Work) Life, Burlew (2006) continually addressed worker reputation, defined as the inter- and intrapersonal characteristics that affect an organization’s perception of an employee. Personality, then, affects successful work adjustment; however, more needs to be understood about the relationship of personality to working successfully or maintaining correspondence with the work environment. Exploration of a worker’s attachment orientation is one aspect of personality that can enhance understanding of how the worker is adjusting to the job and environment.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment orientation is one aspect of an employee’s personality that can affect successful work adjustment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although more focus is on career decision making in relation to attachment orientation (Tokar, Withrow, Hall, & Moradi, 2003; Wolfe & Betz, 2004), researchers are recognizing the influence that clients’ attachment orientations have throughout their careers (Hawkins, Howard, & Oyebode, 2007; Nelson & Quick, 1991; van Ecke, 2007). Attachment theorists posit that chil-
Children learn about relationships with others on the basis of the relationships they have with their primary caregivers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). During the process of attachment to a primary caregiver, internal models explaining relationships are developed (Bowby, 1973). These internal models affect how individuals perceive themselves (e.g., worth loving) and others (e.g., trustworthy).

Adults unconsciously use these early attachment models in relationships. If the adult's internal models interpret others as trusting and self as worth loving, then the adult displays a secure attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Securely attached adults maintain appropriate boundaries; understand that relationships require compromise; and have long, healthy relationships. Evidence suggests that securely attached adults are better able to cope and control their responses to stressful events (Buelow, Lydond, & Johnson, 2002). During career exploration and commitment, securely attached workers may be more willing to explore a variety of careers, have higher career self-efficacy, and have less career commitment fear (Ketterson & Blustein, 1997; Wolfe & Betz, 2004); have high work satisfaction, a positive approach to work, and an ability to maintain boundaries between their work and personal life (Hazen & Shaver, 1987); and have less dysfunctional thoughts about career issues and more positive relationships with coworkers and employers (van Ecke, 2007).

Adults with a negative model of self or others are considered insecurely attached. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) developed three categories of insecure attachments on the basis of Bowby's (1973) model of self and others: preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. Preoccupied attached adults have a negative model of self (not worth loving) and a positive model of others (trustworthy); they trust others but do not believe themselves worth loving and have low self-esteem. Because their self-esteem is dependent on others, preoccupied attached adults often need reassurance and praise. When receiving positive feedback, they may pull back from others. Therefore, preoccupied attached adults may be inconsistent in their work behaviors. During career exploration and commitment, preoccupied attached adults may experience indecisiveness and fear of commitment (Wolfe & Betz, 2004); choose an occupation on the basis of salary, which may cause less satisfaction with career choice (Meredith, Merson, & Strong, 2007); experience less career satisfaction, which may be linked to higher career thought dysfunction (van Ecke, 2007); and, as employees, often have difficulty making self-directed decisions, have their personal relationships affect their work lives, and strive for compliments from others (Hazen & Shaver, 1987).

Dismissing attached adults have a positive model of self and a negative model of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These adults tend to be independently motivated because others cannot be trusted to meet their needs. Dismissing attached adults have less emotional expressiveness and tend to report less intensity in the emotions they do experience (Searle & Meara, 1999). During the career decision-making process, dismissing attached adults have high self-efficacy in their choice of career (Wolfe & Betz, 2004). Although dismissing attached adults trust their career choices, they have higher career thought dysfunctions (van Ecke, 2007), are less satisfied with their jobs (Hazen & Shaver, 1987), and may not seek emotional support from others when they experience job stress (Hawkins et al., 2007). Dismissing attached adults can be difficult employees, often not accepting constructive criticism from peers or
supervisors because the sources cannot be trusted. However, this need to be both independent and highly focused in their work receives favorable consideration for upper management positions. Additionally, these employees compulsively work to avoid relationships with others and often feel nervous when not working. Dismissing attached employees often work longer and harder than do others, but they tend to believe work interferes in their personal lives (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Fearful attachment orientations are developed when individuals have negative models of self and others. Fearful attached adults avoid intimacy with others because they do not perceive others as trustful and need to be accepted by others because of low self-esteem (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Thus, a constant tug-of-war exists between the fear of rejection and the need for relationships with others, which may result in having low balance of control. Fearful attached adults tend to not self-disclose in relationships, have low intimacy and romantic involvement, rarely rely on others for support, and may take on submissive or subservient roles in relationships. Additionally, they may have poor social and emotional coping skills (Buelow et al., 2002). When choosing a vocation, fearful adults experience a high rate of indecisiveness, coupled with a fear of commitment to a particular vocation (Wolfe & Betz, 2004). When under stress because of their vocation, they may not choose to seek emotional support from others (Hawkins et al., 2007). Many of these individuals have difficulty making decisions and may not take orders from bosses well.

Attachment orientation is just one aspect of a worker's personality that can influence successful work adjustment. In the framework of attachment theory, (a) all workers relate to others on the basis of these internal working models of self and others and (b) workers' attachment orientation affects their orientation to work relationships, which affects coworkers, work behavior, and work performance. Therefore, how attachment orientation affects the relationship between a worker and the organization seems an important aspect of work adjustment.

INTERACTION OF WORK ADJUSTMENT AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

From an organizational perspective, a factor necessary to successful work adjustment is a worker's ability to engage in work relationships to fit with the corporate culture, which is demonstrated in work behavior and evaluated in work performance (Burlew, 2006). These work relationships are intrinsic to the nature of work and organizational life and can be influenced by attachment orientation. For example, a worker has to prepare for an important presentation to the board of directors of an organization. A securely attached worker may decide that he or she should not design the presentation alone but that the team who worked on the project should provide input in a collaborative manner. On the other hand, the dismissing attached worker may do just the opposite: not get any input from other project team members and not communicate which key aspects will be included.

These personal work behaviors being influenced by attachment orientation influence the organization and the employees' worker reputations. If successful, one group of coworkers, those working with the securely attached worker, will
likely feel included in the work product and valued for their input and work on
the project. Those working with the dismissing attached worker will likely feel
left out and not valued for their contributions to the project. The dismissing at-
tached worker may be viewed as less successful by the organization or some part
of it (e.g., coworkers).

Work adjustment is a continuous and dynamic process, so understanding how
personality dynamics, such as attachment orientation, affect successful work ad-
justment may seem unpredictable and situational. However, Burlew’s (2006) Model
of Organizational (Work) Life posits a predictable sequencing of an employee’s life
with an organization. The model is developmental in nature, involves six stages of
work life with an organization, includes the typical work environment expectations
and demands at each stage, and emphasizes the influence of intra- and interpersonal
characteristics on work behavior and success.

In Burlew’s (2006) model, Stage 1 is Pre-Hire, involving interviewing in a way
to create an entry reputation as an exceptional employee. Stage 2 is Job Adjust-
ment, relating to an initial probationary period and the adjustment to the new
position, work environment with new colleagues, and corporate culture. Stage 3
is Establishment, requiring mastery of the position for which the worker was hired
and establishment of a secure place in the organization. Stage 4 is Organizational
Advancement, involving how, when, and where to seek advancement opportunities
within the organization. Stage 5 is Organizational Midlife, involving a time when
the worker is considered an expert in the job but not particularly seeking more
advancement or no advancement opportunities are available within the organization.
Stage 6 is Redefining Your Organizational Identity, occurring a few years before
leaving the workforce as a full-time worker and transforming a worker identity
into self-selected life activities.

Using a more developmental and predictable model of work adjustment with an
organization allows employment counselors to either (a) prepare clients for what
organizational and work environment demands can be expected at certain stages of
work life with an organization and how their attachment orientations can affect their
work success at various stages or (b) help clients in a career crisis assess barriers to
success with a particular stage of organizational work life and determine the role, if
any, that their attachment orientations play in successful work adjustment.

FOCUSING ON THE INTERACTION OF WORK ADJUSTMENT AND
ATTACHMENT THEORY

Case studies are presented to illustrate the interaction of work adjustment from a
developmental perspective and attachment theory in providing employment counseling.
Each case illustrates how the stage of organizational life and attachment orientation,
as evident in worker behavior, attitude, and performance, play a role in the client’s
ultimate work success. A counselor can help a client achieve better correspondence
with an organization by focusing on the expected environmental and job demands
for the client’s current stage of organizational life and also examine how attachment
orientation is affecting work success at that stage.
Case 1: The Denied Promotion Employee

Background. B.J. began working at her current company 5 years ago as a sales associate and is now a regional salesperson. She has high expectations of herself, often working overtime to make extra sales. B.J. works well independently but avoids team projects when possible to work in the field. She is one of the top salespersons in the company and rarely implements her supervisor's tips to increase production. Because B.J. is so successful, she applied for a regional management position but was denied the promotion. B.J. is angry and suspicious. She enters counseling, saying, "I can't believe I didn't get that promotion. I'm fed up with this company anyway and should be out looking for another job."

Career intervention. According to Burlew's (2006) Model of Organizational (Work) Life, B.J. is entering Stage 4, Organizational Advancement, by seeking a promotion to a regional manager position. Her timing in seeking a promotion seems appropriate because she has worked for the company long enough in a position necessary for becoming a regional manager, and she has exceptional work performance. However, in her frustration, B.J. has not factored in the organization's overall perspective of her as a worker, including her work behaviors and attitude and the organization's evaluation of her ability to meet the demands of a regional manager position. B.J. also has qualities of a dismissing attachment orientation, which may be contributing to her current career crisis.

Counseling with B.J. may initially be difficult because of her dismissing attachment orientation. She believes and trusts herself but is distrustful of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The counselor should provide a safe base and work slowly to develop a strong trusting relationship with B.J. She will be reluctant to become emotionally open with the counselor; however, if she is able to learn to trust the counselor, she will more likely change her dismissing behaviors in a permanent way. During this process, helping B.J. to recognize when people around her are fulfilling their promises, especially at work, is important. As her trust in others increases, B.J. will more likely trust that others will fulfill their work obligations.

B.J.’s counseling will be both educative and personal in nature. Through bibliotherapy, she can learn about the qualities of a dismissing attached adult, the stages of organizational life, and the concept of a worker reputation and its correspondence with different positions within an organization. Through counseling, she can examine how qualities such as working independently and compulsive overworking have earned her a secure place as a regional salesperson, but how other qualities such as avoiding relationships and not accepting constructive criticism or feedback are not evaluated as favorably (i.e., prediction of success) for a different type of position (i.e., regional manager). However, B.J. must decide what changes to her worker reputation will she make to reach her future goal for promotion.

B.J. can develop an organizational career plan (Burlew, 2006) by examining the job description for regional manager and comparing the requirements with her work performance and personal qualities exhibited to date in Stage 3, Establishment. For example, one job duty of a regional manager is to develop teamwork among the regional salespeople. B.J. is known for avoiding teamwork; thus, this part of her worker reputation would need to change. B.J. can develop a plan of action to demonstrate a change in
her work attitude and the ability to work in teams in her current position (i.e., seeking teamwork opportunities rather than avoiding them). Through role plays, the counselor can help her develop the work behavior and skills necessary for teamwork (e.g., facilitating discussions) and work with her until a comfort level occurs with these skills. As a dismissing attached adult, B.J. may always struggle with developing relationships, but she can demonstrate work behaviors and attitude that create a different worker reputation regarding the ability to work in teams. As B.J.'s changes are implemented, her worker reputation will also change, allowing the organization to recognize a better fit or correspondence with her target position of regional sales manager.

Case 2: The Energetic New Employee

**Background.** R.T. was hired 2 years ago as a sales associate with little experience in sales. During her interview, R.T. was enthusiastic and interested in both the company as a whole and the job responsibilities of sales associate. After 6 months, R.T. became a high-selling associate, often outselling others on her team. Six months ago, she was promoted to a regional salesperson position. R.T. often asks her supervisor for input to increase her sales, implementing many of the tips that fit her personality and client base. R.T. is known as a team player, often working with other salespeople to increase company sales and mentoring new employees. Because of her success, R.T. applied for a regional management position. R.T. was not offered the promotion. She was told that she needed more experience in the company but was encouraged to apply again if such a position became available in the future. R.T. is frustrated at the lack of promotion and enters employment counseling wondering if she should wait for a regional management position to become available or move to another company with a similar opening. She says, "I enjoy working at this company but want to make sure I am not shortchanging myself and my career."

**Career intervention.** R.T. is in Stage 3, Establishment, and developing a secure position in the organization (Burlew, 2006). She exhibits exceptional personal work habits, worker attitude, and work performance. Her worker reputation is strong. In R.T.'s excitement to develop her organizational career, she failed to consider whether she was firmly enough established with the organization for her next promotion, which becomes a timing issue within Stage 4, Organizational Advancement. R.T. is exhibiting a secure attachment orientation, trusting of her judgment and able to ask for help when she realizes the need for others' expertise. From R.T.'s perspective, she has proved herself as an exceptional worker and is ready for the next step in the company. She is frustrated by what she perceives as a barrier for career success.

From the company's perspective, time is needed to evaluate whether R.T. will continue to demonstrate this type of loyalty by being productive throughout her tenure as a regional salesperson. Burnout is a common phenomenon in sales; thus, for the company to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to R.T., it has to be assured that she will continue with this high level of productivity.

Counseling with R.T. will probably be productive because of R.T.'s secure attachment orientation. She trusts her judgment and is able to trust others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and should be able to objectively view both sides of the situation. However, when a barrier to an employee's organization career occurs in the Establish-
ment stage, a major threat to the employee is the worker's reactive attitude, defined by Burlew (2006) as “an immediate, automatic emotional reaction to a work situation . . . [something] you don’t have a lot of control over . . . [it] fluctuates situation by situation at work” (p. 89). A negative reactive attitude can transform an exceptional employee into an unproductive one. Even a short-term change to unproductive or negative employee behavior can have detrimental implications for a worker's reputation, particularly in terms of being able to handle constructive criticism or crisis situations.

Therefore, the counselor working with R.T. might begin by letting her express her negative emotions about the situation. The sooner these emotions are expressed in session and worked through, the less chance that R.T. will allow them, even unintentionally, to influence her work performance and attitude. In general, R.T. should be open to learning how to better prepare herself to apply for a future opening of a regional sales manager position or another position of interest to her in the organization.

Counseling can help R.T. understand that this is a favorable evaluation for an employee in the Establishment stage but that her timing for Stage 4, Organizational Advancement, was an issue. Spending more time in her current position will help her establish a long-term commitment to work in the organization. This will improve her ability to change jobs and companies in the future.

Strategies suggested for R.T. are (a) reevaluate her Establishment stage performance, demonstrate exceptional skills as a regional salesperson, and identify areas for development and (b) develop an organizational career plan. According to Burlew (2006), an organizational career plan “helps you target your next organizational move or challenge and develop an education plan to reach that target” (p. 123). Reevaluating her personal work habits, worker attitude, and work performance at this point will help identify areas for development and developmental assignments in the company. Increased visibility in the company can make her more attractive as a potential candidate.

**SUMMARY**

In each of the cases, the client's attachment orientation interacted with and influenced work success. For ease of discussion, we chose cases in which employees had long-term employment within an organization. However, today's worker may not spend an entire career in one organization, causing employees to redefine their roles not only within their vocation but also within an organization. For example, an employee who is well known in the field and currently in Stage 5, Organizational Midlife, may choose to change companies. Suddenly, this expert in the field is dealing with job adjustment in a new company culture. This change may cause the employee to have adjustment difficulties. These difficulties may trigger attachment behaviors leading to possible relationship issues affecting job performance.

By integrating attachment theory and work adjustment/success theory, counselors are able to work within a holistic framework incorporating the work environment and the personality of the client. The integration of attachment theory allows the counselor to develop a more comprehensive view of work for the client and identify possible options for career success. Assimilation to the work setting is a key component of employment and is a costly issue for human resources if it is not effective. Collaboration between the employer and employee can result in greater job satisfaction. Assessing
the worker's attachment orientation and providing a process to explore the Model of Organizational (Work) Life (Burlew, 2006) can enhance the worker's understanding of the world of work and enhance career development and success.

REFERENCES


