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# The way I see you. Implicit followership theories explored through the lens of attachment

by

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## Abstract

Building on Bowlby's attachment theory, the present study examines the relationship between leaders' attachment style, mirroring their relational experiences with significant others, and implicit followership theories (IFTs). Drawing on the principle of schema transference, it was hypothesized that both anxious and avoidant attachment styles were related to negative IFTs. Furthermore, investigating the phenomenon of defensive projection, it was proposed that leaders' perception of own competence level would moderate the relationship between avoidant style and the IFT facet 'incompetence,' so that avoidant leaders feeling less competent at work would view followers as more incompetent than other avoidant leaders. Survey data was collected from 258 leaders in a variety of work settings. Hierarchical regression analyses supported both hypotheses. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** *attachment theory; attachment style; implicit followership theories; schema transference; defensive projection*

## **Introduction**

It has been more than half a century since McGregor's (1960) seminal book on Theory X and Theory Y managers. In recent years, scholars have found empirical support for McGregor's idea, namely that: (a) leaders do hold different views of followers (Wofford & Goodwin, 1994; Wofford, Goodwin, & Whittington, 1998), and (b) that these views are associated with important outcomes, such as follower liking, relationship quality, trust, and job satisfaction (Sy, 2010). The phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecies, or the Pygmalion effect (Eden, 1990), has been suggested as an underlying mechanism explaining why leaders' view of followers influences important aspects of leader-follower relationships (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997; Whiteley, 2012).

Little is known about the origin of these follower assumptions, referred to as implicit followership theories (IFTs) in contemporary research (Sy, 2010). However, it is often assumed that implicit theories develop through socialization experiences early in life (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013), such as interactions with parents (Keller, 2003). The aim of the present study is to use Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory to investigate empirically, for the first time, the link between attachment style (mirroring the quality of interactions with parents and others held close) and leaders' IFTs. Our study responds to the need for research on IFT antecedents (Epitropaki et al., 2013).

## **Theory and hypotheses**

### *Implicit followership theories*

In organizations, individuals unconsciously deal with information complexity by applying previous experience to what appear to be relevant situations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Lord & Maher, 1991). This entails reliance on pre-existing cognitive schemas to make sense of others' behaviors and to predict future behaviors (Rosch, 1978). Among these cognitive schemas, organizational scholars have showed particular interest in implicit theories, defined as lay theories about a category's most defining characteristics (Phillips, 1984; Rosenberg & Jones, 1972). Consequently, implicit followership theories (IFTs) represent subjective views of followers (e.g., Shondric & Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010). These largely subconscious assumptions (sometimes referred to as prototypes, schemas, or exemplars) include cognitions about how followers behave, their values and their attributes. In contrast to the voluminous

literature on implicit leadership theories (ILTs) (Eden & Leviatan, 1975), IFT research is still in its early stages (Junker & van Dick, 2014).

IFT content seems to comprise both performance-related attributes and attributes such as loyalty and being able to cooperate with others (Van Gils, Van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010). Although most IFT studies have focused on typical rather than ideal IFTs (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010), Sy (2010) found the content of the two to be quite similar. The six factors from Sy's study are industry, enthusiasm, good citizenship, conformity, insubordination, and incompetence. The first three hold a positive valence (i.e. followership prototype), and latter three hold a negative valence (i.e., followership anti-prototype).

Among various information-processing models describing cognitive processes related to implicit theories, categorization theory has received the most attention (Junker & van Dick, 2014). According to this theory, once an individual recognizes and classifies someone, for example as a follower, a pattern-completion process will occur through which the individual "fills in the gap" by applying his or her subjective IFTs (Shondrick, Dinh, & Lord, 2010). More recent information processing models facilitate a deeper understanding of how implicit theories operate (Shondric & Lord, 2010). For example, connectionist theory (Brown & Lord, 2001) and the principle of schema (de)activation may explain the fact that IFTs seem to be both sensitive to context (Kruse & Sy, 2011), and yet quite stable over time (Sy, 2010).

#### *Attachment theory and mental representations of others*

Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory offers an empirically-based framework for investigating the relationship between a) the quality of interactions with primary caregivers in childhood, and b) mental representations of others in adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Specifically, attachment theory proposes that experiences with caregivers in times of need are cognitively encoded, processed, and stored in the form of mental representations of self and others, which in turn provide the skeleton of a person's attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 149).

Attachment style is defined as "an individual's patterns of expectations, needs, emotions, and social behavior that result from a particular history of attachment experiences, usually beginning in relationships with parents" (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Individuals holding a

secure attachment style find it easy becoming emotionally close to others and being dependent on others. Avoidant attachment style is characterized by feeling uncomfortable when others want to get emotionally close, and individuals with this attachment style often express the need for independence. When avoidant individuals face threats or distress, they draw attention away from the threat, or suppress thoughts and mental images likely to activate the attachment system (i.e., deactivating strategies, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, p. 39). Anxious attachment style is characterized by worries of rejection and not being loved, and strongly desiring closeness to others in times of need (i.e., hyperactivating strategies, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, p. 37).

A recent review by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) goes against the more simplistic model by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), which proposed that avoidant individuals hold positive views of self and anxiously attached individuals hold positive views of others. First, they present evidence suggesting several underlying mechanisms explaining how early attachment experiences influences mental representations of others in adulthood (e.g., schema transferences and defensive projection, see below). Second, they describe how individuals with different insecure attachment styles maintain these negative views differently. For example, by diverting their attention away from attachment-related information, avoidant individuals dismiss others' good intentions and positive traits. As a result, genuine signals of others' support and love can be overlooked, easily forgotten, or shallowly processed, so that the existing negative schemas of others seldom are challenged (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 169).

#### *Attachment style as an IFT antecedent*

Although early socialization processes are assumed to influence the development of IFTs (Epitropaki et al., 2013), to our best knowledge, no studies have investigated attachment style as an IFT antecedent. However, implicit leadership theories have been studied from an attachment theoretical perspective. For example, Keller (2003) proposed that ILTs mirror follower experiences with their caregivers. She hypothesized that the ILTs of securely attached individuals include images of sensitive, supportive, and attentive leaders, as these followers have experienced consistent and warm caregiver responsiveness. Anxiously attached followers, having experienced inconsistent caregivers, may likewise hold ILTs that include images of leaders who are inconsistent in their responsiveness, supportiveness, and

attentiveness. Finally, ILTs of avoidant followers, having experienced consistent non-responsiveness from their caregivers, may include images of insensitive, indifferent, and inattentive leaders.

The first empirical testing of Keller's idea was conducted by Berson, Dan, and Yammarino (2006). Results showed that anxiously attached individuals viewed ideal leaders as less considerate compared to secure individuals, and avoidant individuals viewed ideal leaders as less sociable. Later, Shalit, Popper, and Zakay (2010) found, when they had college students watch videos of candidates for a CEO position, that securely attached individuals favored leaders who engage in two-way communication, were warm, considerate, and ethical (personalized charismatic leaders). Avoidant individuals favored leaders who cared more about their own self-interest, were detached, impersonal and cold (personalized charismatic leaders). A similar result was also found by Boatwright, Lopez, Sauer, VanDerWege, and Huber (2010). In the latter study, both anxiously and securely attached individuals shared the preference for relational leaders, in contrast to avoidant individuals. Taken together, it seems that securely and anxiously attached individuals prefer caring and supportive leaders.

Avoidant individuals who value autonomy and independence do not share these views of ideal leaders. Furthermore, these results suggest that ILTs may have roots in images of one's parents, such that people prefer leaders similar to their parents regardless of the quality of this relationship, and that ILTs echo relationship experiences with significant others such that earlier experiences with inconsistent or indifferent relationship partners result in mental models of others that are less trustful.

Whether or not one could expect IFTs to be associated with attachment style based on ILT research, is a matter of generalizability. A fundamental principle in attachment theory is that representations of others are carried forward from one relationship to the next (Bowlby, 1973). Within the social-cognitive perspective, this principle has been termed *schema transference*, and is defined as "the process by which existing mental representations of significant others resurface to influence new social interactions" (Andersen & Cole, 1990). In a study investigating the generalizability of this principle in the context of adult romantic partners, Brumbaugh and Fraley (2006) found evidence that working models of attachment are activated and applied to new relational contexts both in a selective and general way. Specifically, they found that established representations of others influence new relationships more when features of a novel social target overlap with features of one's former significant others (i.e., a selective effect), but also in cases where there was no such overlap (i.e., a

general effect). More evidence in favor of a general effect was found in a study by Ahmed and Brumbaugh (2014), showing that attachment insecurities towards parents among undergraduate students were transferred to a variety of relationships (e.g., friends). As there is both empirical evidence and theory supporting the idea that relational experiences with significant others in childhood can influence new relationships, such as the leader-follower relationship, we propose that the general negative view of others associated with both insecure attachment styles will influence leaders' general assumptions about followers:

Hypothesis 1a: Avoidant attachment style in leader is negatively associated with prototype IFTs and positively associated with anti-prototype IFTs.

Hypothesis 1b: Anxious attachment style in leader is negatively associated with prototype IFTs and positively associated with anti-prototype IFTs.

### *Defensive projection*

In addition to the schema transference process, negative views of others may be exacerbated through a deactivating strategy unconsciously applied by avoidant individuals called defensive projection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Rooted in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1915/1957), this type of projection is defined as the act of perceiving in other people those characteristics that one wishes to deny in oneself (Newman, Duff, & Baumeister, 1997). Studies have confirmed that avoidant individuals, in contrast to secure and anxiously attached people, are more likely to perceive others as dissimilar to themselves to exhibit a false distinctiveness bias (e.g., Gabriel, Carvallo, Dean, Tippin, & Renaud, 2005), and that what is projected onto others is unwanted self-traits (e.g., Mikulincer & Horesh, 1999).

If the defensive projection phenomenon applies to IFTs, we would expect that those avoidant leaders who experience more unwanted negative self -thoughts and emotions are more likely than other avoidant leaders to perceive followers in a negative light because they project their own unwanted material onto them. Furthermore, according to the theory, we would expect this effect to be domain-specific. For example, if a leader experienced lack of motivation at work, (s)he would more likely view followers as less motivated, while other follower assumptions would remain the same.

To explore this phenomenon empirically, competence was selected as the moderating variable. This variable meets an important criterion when studying the defensive projection effect: it taps a subjective unpleasant inner state (i.e., incompetence being an unwanted self-evaluation; Wei, Shaffer, Young, & Zakalik, 2005) and has also proven to be a key follower attribute in studies investigating IFT content (e.g., Van Gils et al., 2010). This is essential, as defensive projection involves transforming an unwanted inner state to an attribution. Competence refers to a person's feelings of curiosity and desire for efficacy, and is considered at all ages one of the basic psychological needs that must be satisfied in order for an individual to experience a sense of growth and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As it is mainly when people lack security or feel threatened that they tend to compensate by engaging in psychological defense mechanisms such as defensive projection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), and the fact that studies have connected lack of competence to internal states such as shame and depression (Wei et al., 2005), we propose that when avoidant leaders feel less competent at work, they may deal with this threat unconsciously by projecting that unwanted material onto followers. Furthermore, as what is being projected is domain-specific material (Mikulincer & Horesh, 1999), we propose that the interaction effect between avoidant attachment style and perceptions of own competence level is limited to the competence facet:

Hypothesis 2: The relationships between leader's avoidant attachment style and the IFT facet incompetence is moderated by leader's perception of own competence level, such that those avoidant leaders who experience lack of competence at work view followers as less competent than do other avoidant leaders.

## **Methods**

### *Sample and procedure*

Replicating Sy's (2010) sampling strategy, data were collected from a wide range of industries (e.g., retail, healthcare, construction, professional services). Organizations were recruited through The Brønnøysund Register Centre, the Norwegian government's main register for data on individuals and businesses. An invitation to participate in this research project was sent to approximately 300 companies from the region of Oslo, resulting in 16 companies (14 within the private sector, 2 from public sector) being willing to participate.



For validity purposes, only leaders were addressed in each company. To reduce the effect of branches, we wanted each company to contribute approximately equally with the number of leaders. Therefore, we asked each organization to select 10 to 30 leaders themselves. These leaders received an e-mail from the HR director or CEO, with the link to our survey, and a friendly request to find time to fill out the questionnaire. Out of the 379 leaders included in the study, 258 leaders (a response rate of 68%) completed the survey. 13% were CEOs or members of the top-management group, 18% were middle-managers, and the remaining 70% were first-line managers. 69% of the participants were male, average age was 46.33 (SD = 8.90), average years of higher education (college/ university) was 3.78 (SD = 1.07), and average total years of experience in leadership positions was 4.02 (SD = 1.18).

### *Measures*

Attachment style was measured with the 36-item instrument Experience in Close Relationships (ECR) by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998), which has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across different cultures (Ravitz, Maunder, Hunter, Sthankiya, & Lancee, 2010). It consists of the two 18-item subscales, attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. Our Norwegian version of the instrument was developed taking a collaborative and iterative approach (Douglas & Craig, 2007) to traditional back-translation (Brislin, 1970, 1980). Responses were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Sample items from the attachment avoidance scale are “I prefer not to show others how I feel deep down” and “I don’t mind asking close others for comfort, advice, or help” (R). Sample items from the attachment anxiety scale are “I worry a lot about my relationships” and “I want to get very close to others, and this sometimes scares them away.” Following the recommendations by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver, to treat attachment style as continuous variables, average scores for each subscale were calculated. As seen in table 1, coefficient  $\alpha$  (for the remaining items after the EFA, described below) was .83 for the avoidant subscale and .85 for the anxious subscale.

Implicit followership theories were measured using Sy’s (2010) trait list, consisting of six first-order factors (i.e., industry, enthusiasm, good citizenship, conformity, insubordination, and incompetence) and two higher-order facets (i.e. followership prototype and followership anti-prototype). The first three and the latter three factors make up the two second-order factors; prototypic (positive) and anti-prototypic (negative) IFTs. Leaders were asked to make

judgments on a 9-point Likert scale on how well adjectives describe “the typical follower.” Coefficient  $\alpha$  for the conformity factor was only .65, and this factor was excluded after the EFA (see below). The remaining first-order factor  $\alpha$ 's ranged from .75 to .90 (table 1). Since the hypotheses make predictions about IFTs along the positive-negative dimension, the two second-order IFT factors (i.e., prototype and anti-prototype followership) were calculated (average scores of first order factors) and used in the regression models.

Competence was measured using the seven items that comprise the competence factor in the Norwegian version (Dysvik, Kuvaas, & Gagné, 2013) of the Work-related Basic Need Satisfaction scale (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010). Sample items include “I doubt whether I am able to execute my job properly” (R) and “I feel competent at my job.” Coefficient  $\alpha$  (for the refined scales after EFA) was .76.

Control variables were age, gender, leadership experience and education, as all four have proven to influence IFTs in earlier studies (Junker & van Dick, 2014).

### *Statistical analyses*

Most theories within the field of attachment share the assumption that attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are orthogonal dimensions, although a recent meta-analysis including 196 samples revealed a weak correlation ( $r = .15$ ) between the two when measured with the ECR (Cameron, Finnegan, & Morry, 2012). Specifically, the theory about hyperactivating and deactivating strategies considers these processes as either/or responses to attachment threats, assuming that the two insecure styles are unrelated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). As the hypotheses in the present study rely on theory that see attachment styles as orthogonal, we applied this perspective when analyzing our data. Principal component analysis (PCA) is a statistical procedure that uses an orthogonal transformation to convert a set of observations of possibly correlated variables into a set of values of linearly uncorrelated variables (Jolliffe & Cadima, 2016). We found this approach suitable for the purpose of testing our hypotheses, as we investigate both how attachment styles differ and opposite valence (positive vs negative) of IFTs. Therefore, to enhance discriminant validity, items were excluded from the subsequent analyses if the factor loading was lower than .50 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 2007), cross-loading was higher than .35 (Kiffin-Petersen & Cordery, 2003), or if the differentiation with other items were lower than .20 (Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994). Basic descriptive statistics include means, standard deviation, and inter-correlations of the control

and main variables (table 1). Calculation of all regression coefficients were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23.

## Results

### *Principal component analyses*

Applying the strict rules of thumb outlined above, six out of the 18 items from the avoidant attachment scale in the ECR (Brennan et al., 1998) were rejected (items 3, 11, 13, 17, 21, and 29), and four out of 18 items (16, 22, 26, and 28) were taken out of the anxious attachment scale. Three out of seven items (7, 10, and 12) from the competence subscale in the Work-related Basic Need Satisfaction scale (Van den Broeck et al., 2010) were also removed. Regarding Sy's (2010) IFT measure, factor analysis showed that all items in five out of six first-order factors performed according to our exclusion criteria and loaded properly on both first- and second-order factors. However, none of the three items that make up the conformity factor loaded properly on either followership prototype or anti-prototype. As this study evaluates the valence (i.e., positive vs negative) of IFTs, and factor analysis showed that conformity did not prove to be considered as neither positive nor negative in our leader sample, this subscale was excluded in the subsequent analyses.

**TABLE 1**

**Descriptive statistics, correlations, and scale reliabilities**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1 Gender	1.69	.47														
2 Age	46.33	8.90	.01													
3 Education	3.78	1.07	-.18**	.09												
4 Leadership experience	4.02	1.18	.16**	.54**	.10											
5 Avoidant attachment style	2.85	.90	.27**	-.03	-.17**	.07	(.83)									
6 Anxious attachment style	2.77	.87	.24**	-.06	-.07	-.07	.21**	(.85)								
7 IFT - Industry	19.95	3.94	-.20**	.08	-.01	.02	-.22**	-.17**	(.83)							
8 IFT - Enthusiasm	21.16	3.86	-.19**	.06	.00	.02	-.29**	-.27**	.75**	(.87)						
9 IFT - Good citizen	22.25	3.67	-.18**	.12	.02	.09	-.19**	-.26**	.65**	.73**	(.90)					
10 IFT - Conformity	17.98	4.09	-.16**	.05	-.15*	-.02	-.12	.03	.30**	.26**	.33**	(.66)				
11 IFT - Insubordination	6.68	3.81	.23**	-.09	-.08	-.06	.33**	.28**	-.37**	-.49**	-.54!*	-.21**	(.84)			
12 IFT - Incompetence	7.53	3.93	.20**	-.14*	-.01	-.08	.27**	.26**	-.48**	-.47**	-.44**	-.25**	.67**	(.75)		
14 Self-rated competence	4.13	.53	-.11	.10	.01	.13*	-.23**	-.27**	.16*	.22**	.27**	.15*	-.25**	-.25**	.24**	(.76)

N = 258; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01. Coefficient α's are displayed on the diagonal.

Gender coded 1 = female, 2 = male; education = years of higher education; Leadership exp = total amount of years in leader roles

IFT = Implicit followership theories; LMX = Leader-member exchange

### *Direct effects*

Hypothesis 1a and 1b proposed a relationship between leaders' insecure attachment styles and negative IFTs (i.e., lower ratings of prototype IFTs and higher ratings of anti-prototype IFTs). As seen in table 1 and 2, both insecure styles were associated with less positive IFTs ( $\beta = -.20$  for avoidant style, and  $\beta = -.18$  for anxious style) and more negative IFTs ( $\beta = -.26$  for avoidant style, and  $\beta = -.21$  for anxious style). All p values were below the .01 level. Collinearity statistics indicated that the two independent variables (i.e., attachment styles) clearly contributed separately in the regression analysis, tolerance values for both IFT regression models being .91 for avoidant attachment style, and .93 for anxious attachment style. Therefore, hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported. Furthermore, these findings indirectly suggest that the secure style (i.e., low scores on both dimensions) is associated with the most positive IFTs among the three attachment styles, as both insecure styles seem to have a similar impact on IFTs. To investigate empirically if the secure style in fact was associated with more favorable IFTs, we performed an additional analysis. First, we merged each leader's scores on the two insecure attachment dimensions to calculate a score reflecting degree of attachment insecurity. Then, we performed the same analysis as described above. As expected, secure attachment style (i.e., low attachment insecurity score) predicted both prototypical ( $\beta = .34$ ) and anti-prototypical ( $\beta = -.40$ ) IFTs. However, as the ECR does not tap the full range of security (Cameron et al., 2012; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), this finding should be interpreted with caution.

**TABLE 2****Regression analysis; the effect of avoidant and anxious attachment styles on prototype (positive) and anti-prototype (negative) IFTs.**

Dependent variables: Implicit followership theories

Variable	IFT - prototype		IFT - anti-prototype	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Gender	-.23***	-.14*	.25***	.13*
Age	.08	.07	-.10	-.08
Education	-.05	-.08	.01	.05
Leadership experience	.05	.05	-.06	-.06
Attachment avoidance		-.20***		.26***
Attachment anxiety		-.18**		.21***
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.14	.07	.19
F value	3.96**	6.72***	5.00***	9.81***

*N* = 258; gender coded 1 = female, 2 = male; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,

*Moderating effect*

Hypotheses 2 proposed that leaders' perception of their own competence level moderates the relationship between avoidant attachment style and IFT facet incompetence. To test this hypothesis, a multiple ordinary least squares regression was conducted. Model 1 contained control variables, model 2 control variables and the main variables, and model 3 consisted of controls, main variables, and interaction effects. The hypothesis was supported, as the interaction term was significant and slopes were according to our prediction (table 3 and figure 1). Considering discriminant validity, additional analysis showed no other interaction effect between the two attachment styles and competence on any of the IFT facets.

**TABLE 3****The moderating effects of competence on the relationship between avoidant attachment style and IFT incompetence facet**

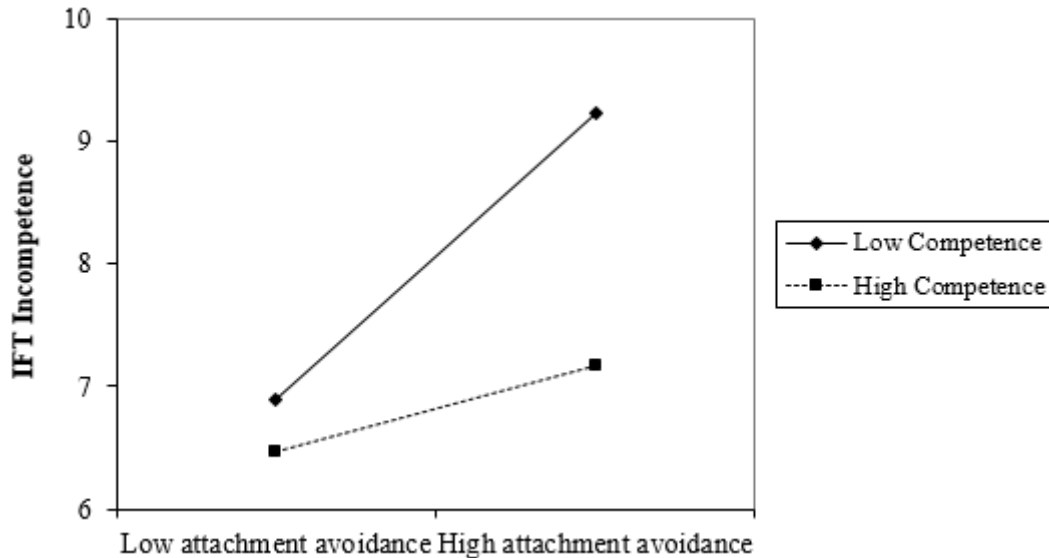
Dependent variable: IFT Incompetence

Variable	Avoidant attachment style		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Controls</b>			
Gender	.85**	.57*	.58*
Age	-.46	-.39	-.39
Education	.16	.25	.20
Leadership experience	-.20	-.18	-.12
<b>Direct effects</b>			
Attachment avoidance		.80**	.76**
Competence		-.67**	-.62*
<b>Interaction effects</b>			
Attachment avoidance x Competence			-.41*
Total R-square	.06**	.14**	.16**
F	4.22**	6.98**	6.71**

*N* = 258; gender coded 1 = female, 2 = male; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$   
Coefficients standardized

**FIGURE 1**

**The moderating effects of competence on the relationship between avoidant attachment style and IFT incompetence facet**



### **Discussion**

Little is known about the origin of implicit followership theories. Furthermore, the question about IFT stability over time has received conflicting evidence, suggesting that leaders both hold relatively stable assumptions about followers (Sy, 2010), and that IFTs seem to change from moment-to-moment. For example, Kruse and Sy (2011) found that negative emotions were associated with more negative IFTs, supporting the connectionist view, namely that implicit theories exist in broad cognitive networks with emotional valence, and experiencing an emotion should increase the likelihood of activating those parts of the network that are emotionally congruent (i.e., affective priming; Hermans, Houwer, & Eelen, 1994). Therefore, scholars have recently called for research on IFT antecedents (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Junker & van Dick, 2014) and the fluid and context-sensitive nature of implicit theories (Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, & Coyle, 2017).

The contribution of our study is two-folded. First, we present empirical evidence that support the existing view on the origin of implicit theories related to leadership processes, namely that they are rooted in early life experiences (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Keller, 2003). A fundamental assumption in attachment theory is that existing mental representations of

significant others are carried forward from one relationship to the next (Bowlby, 1973), and research on schema transference has supported this view (Ahmed & Brumbaugh, 2014; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). Building on Freud's work, that drew parallels between father figures and leaders (e.g., Keller, 2003; Popper & Amit, 2009), organizational scholars have found support for this idea, linking attachment style to implicit leadership theories (ILTs) (Berson et al., 2006; Boatwright et al., 2010; Shalit et al., 2010). The present study develops this research further by connecting attachment style to leaders' assumptions about followers (i.e., IFTs). As proposed, both avoidant and anxious styles were associated with more negative IFTs in our study, indicating that securely attached leaders hold more favorable IFTs. Interestingly, our results indicate that avoidant leaders hold more negative IFTs than anxious leaders, which could be explained by the ambivalent nature of the anxious style (e.g., both hope and doubt), in contrast to the more one-sided negative view of others associated with avoidant attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). A similar difference between the two attachment styles was demonstrated in a study by Zhang and Hazan (2002). They investigated how many behavioral instances were needed to confirm or disconfirm the existence of the positive and negative traits in a hypothetical partner. Results showed that avoidant participants requested more evidence before concluding that others possessed positive traits, suggesting more stability in their negative views of others.

The second contribution of the present study is offering theoretical explanations about the underlying mechanisms connecting experiences early in life (i.e., attachment styles) with IFTs. Our results support the idea that leaders' attachment experiences influence IFTs, not only through the more general process of schema transference, but that there are different routes at the intra-psychological cognitive level. Specifically, our results suggest that one such route is through defensive projection, and that this effect, in line with theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), is associated with the avoidant style. This finding underlines the complexity of the mechanisms involved, as schema transference processes and the defensive projection effect are likely to occur under different conditions. While schema transference occurs when a target reminds an individual of a past significant other (i.e., the principle of schema activation based on similarity; Ahmed & Brumbaugh, 2014), defensive projection is a result of the interplay between a psychological defense mechanism (relatively stable) and an unpleasant inner state (relatively unstable). For example, avoidant leaders might perceive follower as overly distrustful, if this follower reminds the leader of a distrustful parent (i.e., transference), but it could also be the case that the perception of the follower as distrustful



was a result of the leader having behaved in a distrustful manner him/herself, and dealing with this negative way of behaving through projecting the unwanted self-trait onto the follower (i.e., defensive projection).

### *Practical implications*

There is a voluminous literature on the negative consequences of both attachment insecurities (Paetzold, 2015) and negative implicit theories (Junker & van Dick, 2014) in the workplace. Therefore, knowledge on how to reduce these negative consequences is essential, and has thus far received scant attention. In the following, we present some suggestions on how our research findings could be integrated into executive coaching practices and leadership training programs.

Executive coaching is a targeted, purposeful intervention that helps executives develop and maintain positive change in their personal development and leadership behavior (Grant, 2012). Based on Bowlby's (1988) model on helping clients understand their attachment experiences, identify and revise insecure working models, and learn about ways to achieve healthy relationships, Drake (2009) developed a guide for applying attachment theory in executive coaching. Mirroring Bowlby's work, one of the coaching activities is exploring leaders' patterns of attributing and projecting established working models onto present relationships. Our study presents empirical evidence underlining the relevance of this activity. Furthermore, our finding of a defensive projection effect suggests that looking into these patterns of attributing and projecting does not necessarily start out by investigating early attachment experiences, but could also be addressed when avoidant leaders show their tendency to see followers in a negative light. We share Drake's notion, that this tendency should be understood as a strategy developed early in life in order to protect oneself, and that this strategy is now no longer helpful, or even necessary (Cozolino, 2004). The coaching industry is a field with high variation in coaches' background and quality (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2017), and our view is that using attachment theory in leadership coaching only applies to coaches with extensive training in psychology.

Leadership training programs are designed to enhance leader knowledge, skills, and abilities (Day, 2000), and a recent meta-analysis suggests that these programs are substantially more effective than previously thought (Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph, & Salas, 2017). One way of facilitating learning in leadership training programs is to challenge leaders'

preexisting schemas and thinking patterns (Unsworth & Mason, 2012). Scholars have suggested different approaches targeted at changing negative implicit theories, including a self-reflection exercise identifying, validating, and adjusting own assumptions (Junker & van Dick, 2014), and an exercise where participants draw their prototypes before discussing their drawings in groups and in the plenum (Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter, & Tymon, 2011). We suggest that applying a life-span perspective (Murphy & Johnson, 2011) to how leaders' IFTs may have developed could be helpful when reflecting upon their follower assumptions and the current state of their follower relationships. For example, as a supplement to the exercises mentioned above, trainers could end the session by presenting research on IFT antecedents, followed by a personal reflection where each leader is given the opportunity to make sense of the origin of his/her IFTs, in order to increase self-understanding (Bell & Leite, 2016).

#### *Limitations and future directions*

Obviously, this study is not without limitations. Even though we theorize about the direction of the attachment-IFT relationship, the cross-sectional design of our study prevents us from making causal claims (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). The single source design of our study makes it vulnerable to common method biases (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012), although some precautions were taken, such as eliminating common scale properties (e.g., questionnaire vs trait list, different scale type, different number of scale points). Other methods for measuring attachment style (Ravitz et al., 2010) and IFTs (Epitropaki et al., 2013) are available, and may be included in future studies on attachment and IFTs. Principal component analyses revealed low factor loadings on several items. After completing the questionnaire, some leaders gave us feedback that they found the survey time consuming. This is compatible with our observation that most of the "bad items" were the ones being reversed, containing long sentences, or were perhaps more ambiguous, hence being more vulnerable to misinterpretations. Given the fact that validated short-versions of the ECR measure are available (e.g., Olsson, Sørrebø, & Dahl, 2010), we suggest that scholars consider these scales in future organizational studies. Furthermore, the IFT facet conformity did not load on either followership prototype or anti-prototype (i.e., did not seem to be considered by leaders as either a positive nor negative feature). We assume that the latter is a reflection of the fact that all data was collected in a culture where conformity was considered

a strong and by many quite a negative norm up until more recently, while the contemporary view of conformity is more neutral and balanced (Avant & Knutsen, 1993).

IFT research is still in its early stages. Building on the findings in the present study, we suggest four directions for future research. First, for validity purposes, scholars should try to replicate the defensive projection effect among avoidant leaders with other types of negative material than competence. Second, rather than projecting unwanted negative material onto others, studies have shown that anxiously attached individuals have the tendency to project their actual self-traits onto others, in order to create a sense of similarity and closeness (Berant & Wald, 2009; Mikulincer & Horesh, 1999). Therefore, future attachment-IFT studies should investigate if this type of projection (i.e., projective identification; Klein, 1946) is associated with the IFTs of anxiously attached leaders. Third, the principle of (de)activation of the attachment behavioral system is heavily neglected in organizational research (Yip, Ehrhardt, Black, & Walker, 2018), despite being a core tenant of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Our study highlights the importance of incorporating contextual variables likely to reflect attachment system activation (e.g., self-evaluated competence), and encourage future studies to include this aspect of attachment theory (e.g., see Thompson, Glasø, & Matthiesen, 2016). Finally, although we found no significant effects of leadership experience in our study, we notice that the majority of participants were less-experienced leaders, with average years of experience in leadership positions being 4.02, and the standard deviation being 1.18. As prior research has found that experienced leaders hold richer follower descriptions (Sanders, 1999), we encourage future studies to investigate the association between attachment styles and IFTs among highly-experienced managers.

## **Conclusion**

The present study proposed, and found support for, an association between attachment style and leaders' assumptions about followers. Specifically, our findings suggest that attachment experiences from close relationships influence how leaders think of followers, and that underlying mechanisms include both a general effect (i.e., schema transference) and an additional effect that only involves avoidant leaders (i.e., defensive projection). This study is aligned with research on related psychological concepts, such as relationship expectations, relationship attributions, trust, and insecurity dispositions, finding that positive expectations,

with a few exceptions, are associated with better interpersonal functioning (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016).

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