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**Organizational career management: The role of line manager caregiving and employee relational models**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite general consensus that line managers are the key agent in any effective career development system, few studies have attempted to elucidate the exact nature of this role. Applying attachment theory we argue that, through positive histories of line manager 'caregiving' employees are more likely to develop a sense of felt security in their line management relationship. In turn, these secure-base relationships promote more effective individual career management and greater career satisfaction. In Study 1, interviews (N=20) confirmed that employees view career management as a relational process in which line managers are expected to act as caregiver to support their career development. In Study 2, a survey (N=111) confirmed hypothesized relationships between insecure attachment (especially avoidance) and employees' participation in internal career development activities (negative), external career environment exploration (positive), and career satisfaction (negative). Trust in organization mediated these relationships. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Attachment; career management; line manager; supervisor; careers, trust

## **Individual career management and career satisfaction: The role of caregiving and attachment in the line management relationship**

The central role of line management in the successful operationalization of any people management strategy is well documented (e.g. Legge, 1995; Maxwell & Watson, 2006; Renwick, 2003). Recently, careers research has begun to confirm the importance of this dyad in the effective career management of employees. Specifically, despite the growing rhetoric of self-managed careers, the support and guidance of the line manager appears important for the development of satisfying employee career growth, advancement and progression (e.g. Buhler, 1994; Crampton, Hodge & Motwani, 1994; Crawshaw, 2006). To date, however, few studies have explored the nature and consequences of the employee-line manager relationship in the context of managing careers. As a step towards addressing this gap, the present paper adopts attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) as a framework for understanding the development and maintenance of effective career management relationships between employer and employee.

According to attachment theory, through a history of relational experiences with significant others; especially caregiving interactions, individuals develop an internalized sense of relational in/security manifested as an attachment style (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973). Individual differences in attachment style, in turn, serve as a template guiding feelings, thoughts and behavior in social contexts (Collins & Read, 1994). As such, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) offers a well-established relational framework with which to elucidate the nature and effects of interpersonal dynamics in leadership (including line-management) relationships (Bresnahan & Mitroff, 2007; Game, 2008; Kahn, 1998; Popper, Mayseless & Castelnovo, 2000).

## **The Present Studies**

The present studies further both the attachment and careers literatures by exploring the nature and effects of line manager caregiving, and employee attachment to the line-manager, within the context of managing employee careers in organizations. It is proposed, in line with Kahn (1996), that effective career management depends, at least in part, on whether employees experience their line management relationship as providing an empowering ‘secure base’ from which to explore the career growth and development opportunities available within their organization. This paper outlines the theoretical framework, and reports the findings of two exploratory studies designed to investigate the key propositions. The first study qualitatively explores the extent to which employees make sense of the career management relationship with their line managers in terms of attachment-relational (i.e. caregiving) constructs. The aim of the second study is to investigate the impact of felt (in)security (i.e. attachment) in the line management relationship on important employee career management processes and outcomes.

## **The Changing Nature of Career Management and the Line-management Relationship**

Early career models assumed individuals experience lifetime employment with a single employer; regular development opportunities and long term job security (see Schien, 1971). In exchange, employees give their loyalty to one firm and their affective commitment to achieving its strategic aims (see Rousseau, 1995). Within such a paternalistic, long-term psychological contract, career progression and development is planned, managed and protected by the employer. In contrast, the new career context has new and paradoxical implications for the employee-employer relationship (Kahn, 1996); in particular for relationships with line managers. Within the traditional paternalistic employee-line manager relationship the line manager would often be the key driver of an individual’s career, taking

responsibility for his/her career planning and management, and identifying appropriate future career growth opportunities (see Fletcher, 1996). The shift towards greater employee ownership over their career management, including personal career goal setting, identification and securing of important career development opportunities, networking and ongoing self-reflection (e.g. Orpen, 1998), implies a greater self-reliance and thus reduced dependence on the line manager. Within any decentralized decision-making system, however, the line manager takes on increased responsibility as the organizational interface (Kahn, 2002), representing and personifying the employing organization to employees (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). This is no different in a career management context, with the line manager increasingly the key agent responsible for the distribution and allocation of career development opportunities (Crawshaw, 2006) and, in many organizations, commonly asked to take on the roles of careers counselor (albeit at an elementary level), facilitator, mentor and coach (e.g. Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1981; Stickland, 1996; Yarnall, 1998).

Despite limited research exploring the nature, and role, of the employee-line manager dyad within a protean career management context, work by Kahn (1996; 2002) provides a useful start point for understanding these relationships. According to the ‘paradox of self-reliance’ (Bowlby, 1973a; Kahn, 1996), full self-reliance (e.g. self-managed careers) is only possible when a person feels supported and protected by others with whom they have trusting and meaningful connections. In the absence of a secure relational base in the workplace, preoccupation with feelings of anxiety and insecurity make it difficult to venture forth confidently to ‘explore’ personal (career) opportunities in the turbulent, new contract environment (Kahn, 2002). Thus, paradoxically, in the era of the new contract the establishment of trusting and secure employee-line management relationships may be more -

not less - important (Kahn, 1996) as a means of managing the uncertainty inherent in decentralized, self-managed career systems.

### **Caregiving, Relational Models, and Career Management**

The secure base concept forms the cornerstone of attachment theory. In organizational life, Kahn (1993; 1998) and Popper and Mayselless (2003) proposed that just as children need someone to turn to when distressed or anxious, so adults at work need ‘anchoring’ or ‘secure base’ relationships in which to temporarily receive caregiving (i.e. comfort, emotional support, and a sense of being valued) when they feel uncertain or worried. Turning to a caring leader/line-manager is viewed as a functional coping strategy (Mayselless & Popper, 2007) since line managers are often best placed to alleviate work-related anxieties (Davidovitz et al, 2007; Kahn, 1993; Mayselless & Popper, 2007). Effective caregivers are available, sensitive, and responsive whenever called upon (Bowlby, 1973). In addition, they ‘neither intrude nor abandon, that is, are neither too unresponsive (when others seek proximity or help) nor overactive and impinging (when others need to explore and operate on their own); instead they remain emotionally present, ready to come to aid should the need arise’ (Kahn, 1998, p.43).

Whether, and to what extent, employees make sense of line management relationships in a careers context as caregiving, or ‘secure base’ (Kahn, 1996) relationships, has yet to be empirically investigated. It is desirable to establish the relevance of a relational approach in general, and attachment theory in particular, for understanding career self-management in employee-line manager dyads. Given this, Study 1 is exploratory and qualitative, guided by the following research question:

- 1. In the career management context, to what extent do individuals describe and evaluate their line management relationships in caregiving terms?*

Effective caregiving promotes a sense of having access to a secure relational base-camp from which it is possible to explore the social world – safe in the knowledge that one can fall back on this safety net should the need arise (Bowlby, 1973). When leaders provide a secure base it engenders a sense of ‘felt security’ in followers (Popper & Mayseless, 2003). Through repeated interactions with the caregiver, individuals internalize the degree of felt (in)security they experience as a mental map or relational model (i.e. attachment style) (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Relational model security, in turn, is proposed to promote follower autonomy, creativity and other beneficial performance and well-being outcomes (Popper & Mayesless, 2003).

Relational models, or attachment styles, are commonly characterized as two dimensions: higher avoidance reflects doubts about the trustworthiness/dependability of the partner (i.e. a negative model of other); and higher attachment anxiety, reflects doubts about self-worth in the relationship (i.e. a negative model of self) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998). Low scores on both dimensions represent a secure relational model/attachment style (Brennan et al, 1998). When a significant relationship is consistently experienced as a source of sensitive and responsive caregiving a secure relational model is formed. In contrast, attachment anxiety develops in response to inconsistent caregiving; and when caregivers are experienced as unavailable or rejecting, avoidant models are formed (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Kahn, 1993; 1998). In short, attachment styles reflect the history of an individual’s prior caregiving experiences.

Employees hold both *global* relational models - representing generalized beliefs about key relationships including prior authority figures and prototypical leadership expectations (Kahn & Kram, 1994; Keller, 2003); and *specific* relational models - representing beliefs and expectations about specific relationship partners, including line managers (Game, 2008). Within the domain of a given relationship, specific relational models are typically the more

influential in guiding an individual's feelings, attributions and behavior (Cozzarelli, Hoekstra & Bylsma; 2000; Game, 2008; Pierce & Lydon, 2001). Thus, in the present research we argue that the specific relational model representing the line management relationship should be a salient influence on employees' career-related interactions and behavior. Following Game (2008), we assume that the extent to which line managers are willing or able to act as a secure base – in particular as a source of sensitive, responsive support in a career management context - determines (at least in part) an individual's attachment style in the dyad.

### **Relational Models and Internal versus External Career Exploration**

The association between employees' attachment to their line manager and career management processes and outcomes has yet to be empirically investigated. Inferences can, however, be drawn from literature pointing to the role of relational models held for parental relationships in influencing adolescents' career development strategies. Congruent with the notion that felt security (reflecting perceptions of a secure base relationship and positive views of self and others) promotes greater autonomous exploration of the social environment (i.e. self-reliance), young adults with secure parental attachment consistently demonstrate greater exploration of the career environment (e.g. Ketterson & Blustein, 1997), including engagement in career planning activities (e.g. Lee & Hughey, 2001). Similarly, insecure relational models (i.e. avoidance and anxiety) have been associated with 'floundering' and chronic indecisiveness in career decision-making (Wolfe & Betz, 2004).

Before assuming direct parallels between adolescent and adult career behaviors, however, it is important to view career exploration in context. Environmental career exploration concerns individuals seeking out information and opportunities that facilitate career development (Stumpf, Colarelli & Hartman, 1983). Adolescents and young adults,



(who are the focus of much of the existing attachment-careers research) are generally in the process of choosing, or starting, their careers. Therefore, for them, exploration of the career environment can be seen as focused on gaining initial *entry* in to the labor market, occupations and organizations. In contrast, for employed adults, environmental career exploration has been strongly and positively associated with employee *exit* strategies and organizational turnover (Stumpf et al. 1983). This implies an external (i.e. extra-organizational) focus to adult career exploration as is it typically operationalized, yet evidently employees also seek, and engage in, opportunities for personal development within their organizations – for example, promotions, training, secondments etc. (e.g. Baruch & Peiperl, 2000). In other words, employees may choose to explore the internal organizational career environment, too. In this study, therefore, we distinguish between two types of career environment exploration: *intra-organizational* – involving career planning and engagement in development activities using available organizational resources; and *extra-organizational* – involving scanning the external environment for alternative job opportunities. We expect that intra-organizational and extra-organizational exploration will be differentially related to employees' relational models in their line management relationship.

*Intra-organizational Career Exploration* - According to Davidovitz et al. (2007), when leaders fail to act as a secure base it can produce insecurity and demoralization in followers. This leads followers to doubt their own efficacy, with negative consequences for their performance and personal growth. In a similar vein, insecurity (avoidant and/or anxious attachment) in the line management relationship is expected to engender reduced self-reliance and confidence to explore career possibilities within the employing organization (see Bowlby, 1973; Kahn, 1996). Consistent with this, Littman-Ovadia (2008) found that when clients with insecure global attachment styles perceived their career counselors as providing a secure base, they engaged in greater career exploration. In organizational careers research, Colarelli

and Bishop (1990) found positive relationships between perceived mentor support and an individual's career commitment, that is, 'persistence in pursuing career goals in spite of obstacles and setbacks that are encountered' (Colarelli & Bishop, 1990, p. 159). Further, Maurer and Tarulli (1994) reported positive associations between supervisor support and employees' intended, and actual, levels of participation in career development activities. Hence, we expect insecure relational models to be negatively associated with intra-organizational career exploration, specifically:

**Hypothesis 1a:** Insecure attachment (avoidant and/or anxious) in the line manager relationship will be negatively related to employee participation in organizational career development activities.

*External Career Exploration* – Humans have a fundamental 'need to belong', that is, people are motivated to form strong, stable relationships that are characterised by frequent and positive social interaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Accordingly, social relationships are believed to be an important factor in organizational retention – if people feel attached to others in the workplace, they are likely to remain longer in their job (Van Vianen, Feij, Krausz & Taris, 2003). Hence, we suggest that perceived line manager caregiving quality, as reflected in employees' attachment to their line managers (Game, 2008), may influence employees' inclination to stay in a job (or relationship). That is, if line manager caregiving does not satisfactorily meet employees' attachment needs, they may be motivated to explore alternatives. In support, Kahn (1998) found that negative experiences of caregiving in the employee-supervisor dyad were associated with employee reports of burnout and withdrawal. Clearly, many additional factors influence the *decision* to leave a job including satisfaction with career prospects in one's current work role, and the availability of alternatives (e.g. Hulin, 1991). Moreover, consistent with Hypothesis 1a, a degree of self-assurance (as found in secure employee-line manager relationships, Davidovitz, et al., 2007)

may be a pre-requisite for actually making turnover decisions. Nevertheless, we expect that insecurity in the line manager relationship will be positively associated with the less risky strategy of *exploring* alternative career opportunities outside of the organization:

**Hypothesis 1b:** Insecure attachment (avoidant and/or anxious) in the line manager relationship will be positively related to external exploration of the career environment.

### **Relational Models and Career Satisfaction**

Given the increasing centrality of the line manager in individual career management, it is expected that the quality of this relationship will play a key role in determining employees' overall career satisfaction. Indeed, Yarnall (1998) found that career satisfaction was positively associated with line managers' attitudes towards, and support for, employees' career development. From an attachment theory perspective, insecure attachment to the line manager may signify a perceived lack of the secure base provision that is psychologically necessary for the achievement of career goals (Kahn, 1996; 2002), as well as broader dissatisfaction with this key work relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). In line with this, Roney, Meredith & Strong (2004) demonstrated that occupational therapy students with secure attachment styles (to parents) were more satisfied with their choice of career than were insecurely attached students. Furthermore, parental attachment and global adult attachment styles have increasingly been associated with other behaviors related to career satisfaction, including career decision-making self efficacy, progress in career development, and commitment to career choices (Meredith, Merson & Strong, 2007). Therefore, we anticipate that:

**Hypothesis 2:** Insecure attachment (avoidant and/or anxious) in the line manager relationship will be negatively related to employee career satisfaction.

## **The Mediating Role of Trust in the Organization**

Trust in the employer has been placed at the heart of the career management exchange between employer and employee (e.g. Sturges, Conway, Guest, & Liefoghe, 2005). Effective organizational career management is viewed as a process of negotiating and agreeing (both formally and informally) with an individual access to a range of valued career development opportunities and resources (Herriot, 1992). By meeting these career promises, trust in the employer is maintained and upheld, and the individual reciprocates with high levels of desirable work attitudes and behaviors e.g., commitment, citizenship, flexibility, and performance (e.g. Blau, Merriman, Tatum & Rudmann, 2001; Chay & Aryee, 1999; Eby, Allen & Brinley, 2005; Robinson, 1996; Sturges, Conway, Guest & Liefoghe, 2005). In other words, it is the maintenance of trust in the employment relationship that may explain the positive impact of effective organizational career management policies and practices on individual career management processes and outcomes (e.g. career success and career satisfaction) (see Robinson, 1996). Indeed, Crawshaw and Brodbeck (in press) highlights the mediating role of trust in the relationship between the perceived fairness of organizational career management practices and employee careerist orientations to work.

Trust is also at the centre of explanations regarding the development of line manager-directed relational models. Insecurity in the line management relationship, in particular avoidant relational models, reflect lack of trust in, and doubts about the dependability of, the line manager (e.g. Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998). Global anxious attachment has also been associated with negative trust perceptions of relationship partners (Mikulincer, 1995). Although trust, in attachment terms, is focused on deep interpersonal forms of trust, Kahn (1993) highlights the potential transferability of interpersonal and organization-directed trust perceptions: 'Hierarchical superiors, by definition, represent their organizations to their

subordinates. When superiors give or withhold care, subordinates experience it as systemic as well as personal' (Kahn, 1993, p.561). Given this, it is expected that:

**Hypothesis 2a:** Insecure attachment (avoidant and/or anxious) to the line manager will be negatively related to trust in organization;

**Hypothesis 2b:** Employee trust in the organization/employer will mediate the relationships between insecure attachment (avoidant and/or anxious) in the line management relationship and employee participation in career development activities, extra-organizational career exploration, and career satisfaction.

In sum, the career-management process is seen as increasingly 'relational' – involving the interaction of interpersonal relationships with the worlds of work and career (Blustein, Palladino Schultheiss & Flum, 2004). Given the lack of prior empirical research in this area, the present research is exploratory. Two studies are presented. Study 1 investigates whether employees make sense of their career management in caregiving terms. Building on this, Study 2 tests hypotheses exploring the potential impact of felt insecurity in line-management relationships on individual career development activities, extra-organizational career exploration, career satisfaction, and the potential mediating role of trust in the organization.

## **STUDY 1**

### **METHOD**

#### **Context**

Employee experiences and perceptions of organizational career management practices were investigated in FinanceCo. In this organization, the provision of satisfying careers and continuous career development opportunities dominated HR and corporate rhetoric. Several sophisticated interventions had been introduced by the employer to specifically support the careers and career development of their employees. These included intranet access to online

training, internal vacancies and secondment opportunities, on-site careers advisers/counselors, development centers, literature on common career paths, mentoring programmes, management development/talent management programmes and an annual career development review for all employees. Interventions were supported by a dedicated career management team within the HR function. This comprehensive approach to managing careers fits with best practice models of HRM and career management proposed in the literature, with access, support and opportunity provided to all (see Harrison, 2002). As such FinanceCo provided an appropriate career context in which to explore the nature and effects of caregiving and attachment in the line management relationship.

## **Procedure**

Given the exploratory nature of the research, and the need to get closer to an understanding of how employees conceptualize their career management experiences and, in particular their line-management relationship, a qualitative approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to elicit contextually rich accounts of individuals' day-to-day 'reality' of organizational career management processes and practices. Interview questions were based on the review of the literature. Interviewees were asked about their experiences and perceptions of the interpersonal relationship with their line manager. The aim was to get a deeper insight into what employees expected in terms of their relationship with this key agent in their career management. Of particular interest was whether, from an attachment theory perspective, employees make sense of career management in their line-management relationships in caregiving terms. Interviews were conducted in an appropriate private space in the organization (two were conducted via telephone). Interviews lasted around an hour. With permission interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Supporting notes were also taken.

## **Participants**

Interviews were conducted with a random sample of twenty employees. Of these, 45% were female, 40% occupied management positions, 25% worked in retail stores (with 75% working in head office and support functions), and all were of a white UK ethnic origin.

## **Analysis**

In order to address the research question, analysis focused on the nature of the relationship between employee and line manager within the context of career planning and decision-making. Transcripts were explored using template analysis (King, 1998), a thematic coding technique in which codes were developed both a priori based on the literature review, and iteratively as analysis proceeded. For example, the operationalisation of caregiving proposed by Game (2003) was incorporated a priori into the coding framework. The coded text was analyzed with the aim of identifying shared meanings and interpretations (Bryman, 2001) across participants in relation to their experiences of, and views regarding, organizational career management practices and the line manager relationship.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Line Manager Caregiving and Career Management**

Consistent with the pervading rhetoric in the literature regarding self-directed career management (for reviews, see Arnold, 2001; Newell, 1999), a key theme in interviews was that of ownership and personal responsibility regarding career decisions and planning. All participants asserted that 'it's up to me' to influence the way their careers 'ultimately' developed. Moreover, consistent with a relational conceptualization, they also recognized the importance of their line manager in this process. That is, career-management was perceived

as a form of partnership, in which the employee was expected to take the lead. Thus, interviewees emphasized that ‘line management will help you’ but ‘you have got to be proactive yourself’.

The majority of interviewees expressed satisfaction with their career management experiences in the context of the organization and their current line management relationships. As such, their accounts provide some insight into the characteristics of effective employee-line manager career management relationships, and the ways in which employees construct, or make sense of them, as more or less effective. When evaluating the career management effectiveness of their line manager, participants’ accounts highlighted themes that paralleled a number of the key behavioral components of effective supervisor caregiving proposed by Game (2003). In particular, the *acceptance, accessibility, awareness, understanding, promptness, appropriateness and consistency* of the line manager, and the *collaborative* nature of career planning and decision-making between the two, all emerged as important elements of their career management relationship. Table 1 summarizes these themes, their definitions, and example quotes.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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Of these themes *awareness, acceptance, and accessibility* shown by the line manager, and the *collaborative* nature of career decision-making and planning, emerged as the most important aspects of the career management relationship, with each of these themes referred to directly by between 40 and 50% of interviewees. Thus, line managers in more effective career management relationships were described as being attuned to their employees’ needs and concerns regarding career development, e.g. knowing ‘where I want to go and how quickly’; and as shown by the quote in Table 1, this awareness was proactively acquired and



maintained through frequent informal interactions. Line managers were also perceived as interpersonally warm, accepting interviewees as they were in terms of their career goals and aspirations. Notably, among the less satisfied interviewees, the line manager was perceived as likely to dismiss, or reject individuals and their concerns should they turn to them for career-related advice. The following extract illustrates how one interviewee compared career planning in his past (good) and current (poor) line management relationships with reference to the degree of acceptance shown by each:

...with my old manager I could say, 'look I feel I'm slacking here, is there something I could do', whereas I think I would be almost looked down upon if I went to my current manager.

(Male, Manager)

In response to employees' career-related needs and concerns effective line managers were described as 'open' and 'accessible'. That is, despite other demands on their time line managers were available to provide support or advice if interviewees needed to discuss career-related issues. As the comment in Table 1 illustrates, accessibility was perceived as more than simply a physical presence – it was also about the line manager being psychologically available by showing a genuine interest in, and concern for, employees' career goals and needs. These line managers were also described as being able to 'listen' and if action was required they worked collaboratively with the individuals, providing them with a clear voice and influence over decisions effecting their career management and development. Collaboration was also a key construct for the less satisfied interviewees. In the example shown (see Table 1), the line manager effectively excluded the employee from participating in his own career development review by taking the process over and making development decisions on behalf of the employee without consultation.

A smaller proportion of the satisfied interviewees (between 10 and 20%) referred to the importance of *empathetic*, *prompt*, and *appropriate* support from their line manager. In other words, these line managers were described as able to understand career needs, concerns,

and aspirations from the perspective of their employees. When issues or concerns were raised, line managers were ‘always there’ to provide timely and appropriate support. Notably, appropriateness was conceptualized not just in terms of utility or instrumentality in resolving issues, but also in terms of ‘being fair’, as shown in Table 1. Finally, the attachment literature emphasizes the importance of *consistency* in the provision of sensitive, responsive caregiving (e.g. Ainsworth et al, 1978; Game, 2003). In this study while interviewees did not refer directly to the consistency of their line manager in their interactions with them, this appeared implicit in accounts of those experiencing more effective relationships.

Overall, the interview findings suggest that managing employee careers can be construed as a relational process between employee and line manager, in which the line manager is expected to act as a temporary caregiver to support and facilitate the self-exploration and career development activities of their employees. Study 1 provided preliminary evidence supporting the centrality of the line manager-employee relationship in career management and demonstrated that individuals evaluate this relationship in caregiving terms. These findings support the adoption of attachment theory as a useful theoretical framework for evaluating the career management process. However, perceptions of line manager caregiving are only part of the story. Study 2 aimed to build on this by testing more explicitly the potential relationship between an individual’s attachment to the line manager and important career-related attitudes, behaviors and activities. To this end, the relationships between employees’ line manager specific attachment, trust in their organization, career exploration behaviors and career satisfaction were examined.

## **STUDY 2**

### **METHOD**

#### **Participants**

Hypotheses were tested with 111 individuals currently enrolled on part-time postgraduate qualifications at three UK universities. All participants were in full time employment, in organizations of various sizes across the private, public and voluntary sectors. 86.6% of the sample was female and 79.5% of white UK ethnic origin. The average age of the sample was 32.2 years and average tenure at their current place of work 3.9 years.

#### **Procedure**

Questionnaires were distributed to participants at the beginning of one of their classes. Following a brief introduction by a researcher, participants were asked to take the questionnaire away and complete it in their own time. Full instructions for completing the questionnaire were included on the front cover of the questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. After completion participants returned their questionnaires in a sealed envelope provided to their module leader. No course credit or monetary incentives were given for participation in the research. In total 114 questionnaires were returned. After deletion of cases with missing data the final sample size was 111, representing a response rate of 49.1%.

#### **Measures**

*Employee-line manager attachment* - individuals responded to an eleven-item supervisor-specific relational models scale developed by Game (2008). A six-item *avoidance* scale concerns the reluctance to depend on the supervisor, and discomfort with closeness in

the relationship. An example item is, “I prefer not to show my supervisor how I feel deep down”. A five-item *anxiety* scale relates to an individual’s preoccupation with closeness in the supervisory relationship, including a longing to be more ‘at one’ with the supervisor. An example item is, “I sometimes wonder if I’m my supervisor’s favorite employee”. Responses were given on a seven-point scale from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  scores were 0.73 (avoidance) and 0.61 (anxious) respectively.

*Trust in the organization* - two items were used from a scale developed by Brockner et al. (1997). Responses were made on a five point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A sample item from this scale is, “Management can be trusted to make decisions that are also good for me”. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.81.

*Intra-organizational career development activities* - respondents were presented with a list of eleven of the most common career development opportunities reported in the literature (see Baruch & Peiperl, 2000). Examples include promotional opportunities, attending an external training course, secondments, special assignments and education leading to qualifications. Space was also provided to list additional career development activities. Participants were asked to report any career development activities that they had experienced in the past two years. For each participant, the total number of experiences was calculated to indicate their level of intra-organizational career exploration.

*Extra-organizational environmental exploration* – this was measured using the six-item ‘environment exploration’ sub-scale of the career exploration survey (CES) developed by Stumpf, Colarelli and Hartman (1983). These items tapped the extent to which individuals were seeking out information relating to, and opportunities for, career development in the external (to their current employer/organization) labor market and professional/career environment. Respondents rated on a five-point scale, ranging from a little/no extent (1) to a

great deal (5), their behavior over the last three months (e.g. “Obtained information on the labor market and general job opportunities in my career area”). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.87.

*Career satisfaction* - this was measured using a five-item scale (Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990) tapping individual satisfaction across a variety of career-related outcomes (e.g. “I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals”). Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.85.

*Controls* - previous research has found significant relationships between gender, age, tenure, seniority and ethnicity, and a number of career-related outcomes including, career satisfaction, career success and promotional attainment (e.g. Sutherland & Davidson, 1996; Wentling, 1996). Therefore, these demographic variables were controlled for in all analyses.

## **Analysis**

In line with recent recommendations (e.g. Kenny, Kashy & Bolger, 1998; MacKinnon, Fairchild & Fritz, 2007) the tests for direct effects and mediation (indirect effects) were carried out using path analysis and bootstrapping (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) techniques. In brief, two models were explored: 1) the relationships between insecure (avoidant) attachment to the line manager and employees’ participation in internal career development activities, external career environment exploration and career satisfaction and, 2) the mediating role of trust in organization between these variables. All hypotheses were tested using the AMOS version 16 (Arbuckle, 1999) structural equation modeling package.

## **FINDINGS**

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations between the model variables are presented in Table 2. Against expectations, anxious employee-line manager attachment was

not significantly related to any of the variables in the model. Anxious attachment was therefore excluded from subsequent analysis. However, significant correlations were found between avoidant attachment and organizational trust, and organizational trust and the dependent variables (participation in career development activities, career environment exploration and career satisfaction). This gave confidence in the utility of proceeding with analysis with only avoidance representing relational insecurity.

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### **Direct Effects of Relational Model Insecurity on Career Outcomes**

The first model tested the hypothesised direct effects between avoidant attachment and the career outcome variables, after controlling for demographic variables. The results are shown in Table 3. In support of Hypothesis 1a, a direct negative relationship between avoidant attachment and participation in career development activities was found ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $p = .017$ ). Additionally, supporting Hypothesis 1b, avoidant attachment in the line management relationship was negatively associated with extra-organizational career environment exploration ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .013$ ). However, no support was found for Hypothesis 2 which predicted a direct relationship between avoidant attachment and career satisfaction ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p = .109$ ). Despite this, a significant relationship between the mediator and dependent variables is sufficient to establish mediation using bootstrapping techniques (Kenny, 2007). Hence career satisfaction was retained in the subsequent mediation model.

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## Mediating Role of Trust in the Organization

Figure 1 presents the standardized direct effects and squared multiple correlations of the mediation model. As predicted in Hypothesis 2a, avoidance was negatively related to perceptions of trust in the organization ( $\beta = -.25, p = .017$ ). Perceptions of trust in the organization were also significantly and negatively related to extra-organizational career environment exploration ( $\beta = -.23, p = .012$ ) and significantly and positively associated with career satisfaction ( $\beta = .40, p = .007$ ). No direct relationship between trust in the organization and intra-organizational career exploration (i.e. participation in internal career development activities) was found, however ( $\beta = .08, p = .409$ ).

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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In support of Hypothesis 2b, bootstrapping tests found significant indirect effects of avoidant attachment on extra-organizational career environment exploration ( $\beta = -.06, p = .016$ ) and career satisfaction ( $\beta = -.10, p = .017$ ), via the mediating variable of trust in organization. No direct relationship was observed between avoidant attachment and external career environment exploration ( $\beta = .16, p = .065$ ), nor between avoidant attachment and career satisfaction ( $\beta = -.05, p = .609$ ), suggesting full mediation. Given the non-significant relationship between trust and participation in internal career development activities, no mediating relationship between avoidant attachment, trust in the organization and career development activities was observed. However, the direct negative relationship between avoidant attachment and participation in career development activities remained significant in this model ( $\beta = -.19, p = .047$ ).

In sum, the findings partially supported the proposed mediation model. Organization-directed trust perceptions mediated the positive relationship between avoidant attachment to

the line manager and extra-organizational career environment exploration, and the negative relationship between avoidant attachment and career satisfaction. Although no mediation was observed, avoidant attachment in the line management relationship was nevertheless significantly and negatively associated with employees' participation in intra-organizational career development activities.

## **DISCUSSION**

The overall aim of the two studies was to explore the salience of attachment theory for providing new insights into the role of line managers in the career development of their employees. In Study 1, employee accounts of career management confirmed their line managers as the key agent in this process. More importantly, when these employees evaluated the quality of the career management support received from their line manager, they did so in caregiving and attachment terms (see Ainsworth et al., 1978; Game, 2003; Kahn, 1993). Consistent with Kahn (2002), it appears that more effective career managers were those line managers who provided the relational conditions associated with a secure base to which employees could retreat for advice, support and reassurance about their careers when needed. Study 2 built on these findings, highlighting significant negative implications of perceived lack of a secure base and low interpersonal trust (i.e. insecure attachment in the line management relationship) for career-related attitudes and behaviors. In particular, employees who were avoidantly attached to their line managers, were less likely to engage in intra-organizational career exploration, and more likely to look outside the organization for alternative opportunities. Moreover, negative expectations of the line management relationship appeared to be projected on to the organization as a whole since the associations found between avoidant attachment and career satisfaction and extra-organizational career exploration were fully explained by organization-directed trust.



The results of both studies together suggest that attachment insecurity in the line management relationship, and in particular perceptions of the line manager as an unavailable and unsupportive caregiver, may have a significant negative impact on employee career satisfaction, participation in career development activities and perhaps, ultimately, on retention. This is consistent with, and extends, earlier theorizing concerning the impact of line manager caregiving on employee career-related self-reliance (e.g. Kahn, 1996; 2002). These findings are also in line with wider career theory and research. In particular, Herriot and Pemberton's (1996; 1997) 'new deal' suggests that organizational trust may be upheld by re-focusing OCM strategies on the promotion of an individual's employability within the external labor market (see also, Newell, 1999; Herriot, 1992). By providing employees with effective support for career planning and exploration, and interventions that help develop transferable skills (thus providing employability security), employers may continue to develop trust relationships and elicit the high levels of citizenship, commitment and performance (albeit perhaps over a shorter relationship time-span) required for continued organizational survival and competitiveness (e.g. Cameron, Freeman & Mishap, 1991).

In general, the findings present further support for the already considerable body of research that positions the line manager at the centre of contemporary HR strategy (e.g. Legge, 1995). However, more importantly, these studies make a significant contribution to the careers literature by providing new insights into the nature and importance of line managers in the career management process. Although previous research has consistently recognized the importance of line managers in employees' career development (e.g. Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1981), until now few studies had attempted to understand the exact nature of this role and why some line managers may be more effective career managers than others. Moreover, few studies (e.g. Yarnall, 1998) had examined the implications of the line manager relationship for important career, and career management, outcomes.

By applying attachment theory, therefore, the caregiving and relational component of the line manager-employee career management interface has been uncovered and explored. It is apparent that line managers need to be available, sensitive and responsive in order to facilitate effectively employees' career management needs. This extends previous research that has simply prescribed various ill-defined career management tasks to line managers (e.g. Bowen & Hall, 1977). In addition, the significant relationships between supervisor-specific attachment models and important career-related outcomes reported in Study 2 provides much needed empirical evidence that these relational concerns matter in terms of promoting more positive employee attitudes and behaviors.

Despite the largely supportive findings across the two studies it is important to note that, against expectations, anxious attachment did not appear to impact on any of the key career outcomes tested in Study 2. Anxious attachment is largely concerned with issues of self-worth in the line manager relationship and it may be that such concerns are less relevant (than say the trust-related concerns associated with avoidant attachment models) in determining employees' career attitudes and behaviors. Further research is needed to explore these possibilities. However, it should also be noted that the reliability of the attachment anxiety measure was relatively low, and this may also have contributed to the non-significance of the findings.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The findings must be interpreted in the light of some methodological limitations. Firstly, both studies were relatively small-scale. Despite this, an organizationally representative sample of different demographic and employment groups was attained in the interviews, and the survey comprised respondents from across a range of organizations and sectors. Hence, the samples elicited reasonably representative views and experiences of

employees and their career management relationships with line managers. A key caveat of Study 2 however, is that the sample was largely female. Until further research with a more diverse sample is conducted it should be kept in mind that gender differences may exist in relational models, with implications for the generalizability of the findings. Gender differences are not usually found in global relational models however (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and it is expected that specific models would show a similar pattern, since they are effectively sub-sets of a broader relational model hierarchy (Collins & Read, 1994). Finally, data for both studies was only collected at a single point in time. Both careers and the line manager-employee relationship are dynamic and changing, and as such may not be fully captured or explained by this method. Additionally, it is not possible to infer causality from cross-sectional data, so the associations discussed must remain speculative until further research is conducted.

In addition to addressing these methodological limitations, there is much scope for further research. First, additional qualitative research should be conducted in different organizational contexts to replicate findings regarding the nature and effects of line manager caregiving. Second, development of a scale measure of leader/line manager caregiving would enable larger scale quantitative investigation of the relationships between caregiving, relational models and career-related outcomes. In particular, in order to fully test the theoretical model, research should attempt to elucidate additional mechanisms through which relational models impact career attitudes and behavior. Kahn (2002) proposed that line manager caregiving promotes greater self-reliance; hence research including self-efficacy and other indicators of self-reliance should be conducted. Finally, longitudinal research designs are needed if we are to fully understand how relational models develop over time through caregiving interactions in the line management relationship, and the implications of this for the career management relationship.

## **Practical Implications**

Despite these caveats a number of potentially important implications for employers can be drawn from these findings. Interview findings suggested that employees recognized, and perhaps more importantly accepted, the need to take responsibility for their own career management. Career self-management, however, involves a complex set of traits, competencies and skills including (but not only), critical self reflection, goal setting, proactivity, networking, politicking, self efficacy, tenacity and resilience (see DeFillipi & Arthur, 1994; Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005). It is not enough for employers to simply devolve responsibility for career management to the individual, they must also support them by helping them to develop these skills and competencies and giving them the time and space to reflect, plan and network.

Evidence from this research suggests that the line manager is central in providing this support and guidance. Importantly for managers and employers, it appears that when individuals reflect on the career management support and guidance that is provided by their line managers, they do so by reflecting on their relationship history and specifically the caregiving that they have experienced (or not). Effective career management relationships are therefore a function of secure relational models and interpersonal trust that has been developed through open, sensitive, inclusive and responsive line manager caregiving (see Game, 2003). Conversely, when such caregiving is missing more insecure, avoidant or anxious attachment models may develop and the career management relationship may potentially break down.

Within decentralized career management contexts, employers must firstly make sure that line managers understand that they are the key organizational agent responsible for supporting employee careers and career management. Moreover, it is essential they are made aware of the relational and caregiving nature of this role, and that they are provided with the

required knowledge and skills to carry it out effectively. Such training has been shown to be effective in other contexts, for example the parent-child relationship (see George & Solomon, 1999), and it is believed that there is scope for management/supervisor development programmes to include such initiatives.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the findings offer preliminary indications that the extent to which line managers can be depended upon to act as a secure relational base in a career management context may have important consequences for employees' ability to meet the challenge of self-managed careers. Moreover, it appears that the security of relational models held for the line management relationship also shapes trust in the wider employment relationship with concomitant effects for important career-related behaviors and attitudes. The research supports emergent evidence that, as employees strive to negotiate the uncertainties of the new career landscape and take on increased responsibility for their own career development and progression, the centrality and importance of trust and support in the line-management relationship is heightened. Effectively, organizational management of employee careers can be seen as, in part, embedded in a history of prior caregiving interactions between line managers and their employees.

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**Table 1: Employees' reflections on caregiving in their line management relationships**

Theme	Definition (from Game, 2003)	Example Interview Quotes
Awareness	Caring supervisors are aware of how their employees are feeling and of significant work-related and/or personal concerns.	"She knows where I want to go and how quickly I want to get there... so she gives me the support that I need... by the one-to-ones and by basically giving me the support on a daily basis. She is there to help me along as much as possible" (Male, Customer Adviser)
Understanding	Understanding situations from the perspective of the employee – requiring a degree of empathy.	"... we had been very busy and I really wasn't getting the study time I should have; not very happy as you can imagine. But she ( <i>line manager</i> ) was so supportive and sympathetic and without me making excuses or giving reasons of whatever, she was there ( <i>saying</i> )... 'I know why this is, because of this and this', and I mean all of that is going to get the best out of me isn't it? (Male, Branch Manager)
Acceptance	Caring supervisors accept their employee as they are. In part conveyed by warm interpersonal style.	"We understand each other and the different ways we work... I believe we get on pretty well now... There's trustworthiness... you know we can approach each other in a respectable way without sort of being down each other backs all the time... we get on OK sociably as well... the relationship is more sort of relaxed and that way we get on a lot easier and more work gets done, you get better ideas, better feedback from both parties. We listen to each other and that way you can improve... The discussions (about career development) are more open now because I feel you can speak your mind." (Male, Team Leader)
Accessibility	Despite other demands, caring supervisors are easily accessible and available, both physically and psychologically.	"I think she is very accessible... I do think she is open, I do think she is concerned... she asks your opinion she very much involves you" (Female, Manager)
Promptness	When employees communicate that they are in need of help or advice, caring supervisors will act promptly.	"I think I have managed quite well on my own, but yes I mean she's always there when you need advice... (Female, Customer Service Manager)
Appropriateness	Caring supervisors take the most appropriate course of action in dealing with an employee's concerns.	"From the point of view of an individual, if they feel like somebody is being fair to them, looking at things from their angle and from their view, they will produce better results" (Female, Manager)
Collaboration	Caring supervisors respect employees' independence and ownership of a problem, and do not try to intrude or take control.	"They don't really ask you if there is anything else that you'd like to do... I didn't realize that ( <i>my</i> ) career development review had been filled in ( <i>by his line manager</i> ), because there was no discussion about it in my review... I just laughed, I mean I couldn't even put in an appeal... my first comments were that there wasn't even a career development discussion, it wasn't part of the conversation. I applied for two jobs outside retail in the preceding six months so that they'd get the message." (Male, Diversity Team)

**Table 2: Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	1.87	0.34										
Age	32.16	8.24	-.02									
Tenure	3.87	4.26	-.06	.49***								
Ethnicity	1.20	0.41	.07	.08	-.03							
Seniority	1.44	0.49	-.13	.29**	.17	-.18						
Anxious	3.30	0.96	-.07	-.02	.01	.03	.14					
Avoidant	3.30	1.13	-.01	-.10	-.14	-.06	-.03	.08				
Trust	3.05	0.82	.10	.09	.05	-.03	.07	.05	-.27**			
CD Activities	4.46	2.11	-.18	-.02	.16	-.10	.10	.07	-.23*	.13		
Environment	2.45	0.89	.08	-.05	-.14	.32**	-.20*	.08	.21*	-.28**	-.09	
Exploration												
Career satisfaction	3.56	0.72	-.00	.14	.15	-.10	.14	-.08	-.18	.44***	.18	-.10

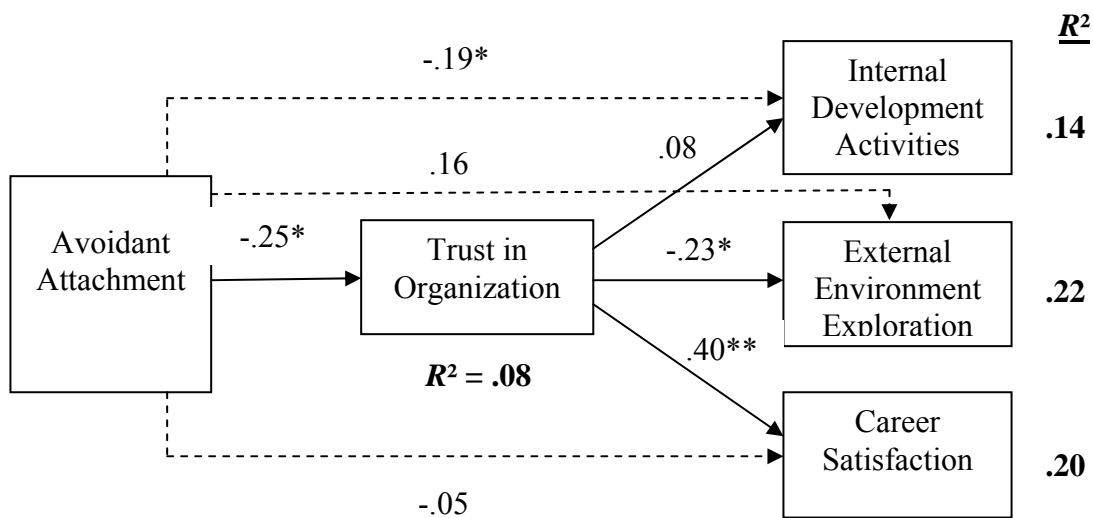
Notes:  $N = 111$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 3: Direct Effects of Avoidant Attachment to the Line Manager on Career Outcomes**

	$\beta$	$R^2$
Intra-organizational Development Activities	-.21*	.14
Extra-organizational career environment exploration	.22**	.17
Career Satisfaction	-.15	.05

Note:  $N = 111$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

**Figure 1: Mediation of Avoidant Attachment to the Line Manager and Career Outcomes by Trust in Organization**



Note:  $N = 111$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$