

**The role of line managers in employee career management:  
An attachment theory perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Line managers increasingly play a key role in organizational career development systems, yet few studies have examined the nature of this role or its implications for employee career attitudes and behaviors. In two studies we used attachment theory to explore this issue. In Study 1, in-depth interviews (N=20) showed that employees viewed career management as a relational process in which line managers are expected to act as ‘caregiver’ to support individualized career development. Study 2 was a large-scale international survey (N=891). Participants scoring higher on attachment avoidance in their line manager relationships reported more negative perceptions of career growth opportunities, lower participation in organizational career development activities, and higher turnover intentions. Trust in the organization partially mediated the relationship. Theoretical and practical implications for HRM are discussed.

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

## **The role of line managers in employee career management: An attachment theory perspective**

HR/people management responsibilities, including career planning and management, are increasingly devolved to line managers (e.g. Maxwell and Watson 2006; Perry and Kulik, 2008). While this is a global trend, relatively little is known about its impact on the effectiveness of people management in general (Larsen and Brewster 2003; Perry and Kulik 2008), and employee career management in particular. Facilitating employee career management brings the quality of the employee-line manager interpersonal relationship to the fore. Using attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973a, 1980), we therefore explore employees' experiences of the line-management relationship in a career management context; and investigate how employee perceptions of the relationship influence career attitudes and behaviors across a large, international sample.

Effective career planning, management and development in organizations are not only central to creating a skilled and flexible workforce, but also key in securing high levels of employee trust, commitment and engagement (e.g. Herriot, Manning and Kidd 1997; Sturges et al. 2002; Sturges et al. 2005). When support for career development is absent trust in the employment relationship is lost, and individuals are more likely to seek alternative employment and exit from the organization (Aryee and Chen 2004; Robinson 1996). The effective management of careers is thus vital for the continuing survival and prosperity of organizations. At the same time, the roles of HR, line management and employees in the career management process are evolving, including devolution of some HR responsibilities to line managers, and greater emphasis on individual career self-management (Baruch 2004; 2006; Sturges, Conway and Liefoghe 2010). All play a part in meeting both the organization's need to develop and retain a skilled and flexible workforce, and employees' career goals. However, the line manager's role in employee career management is of

particular concern given previous studies suggesting line managers often lack the HR skills and knowledge necessary for fulfillment of devolved responsibilities (e.g. Perry and Kulik 2008; Whitaker and Marchington 2003).

Moreover, despite an established literature recognizing the *potential* of line managers to facilitate effective employee career management (e.g. Bowen and Hall 1977; Crawshaw 2006), the importance of the *interpersonal* relationship between line manager and employee in shaping career-related attitudes and behaviors remains relatively unexplored. To address this gap, we apply attachment theory (Bowlby 1969, 1973a, 1980) which is gaining popularity with leadership scholars because it reveals underlying relational dynamics untapped by existing theories (Bresnahan and Mitroff 2007; Kahn 1998). Attachment theory describes how individuals develop relational attachment orientations through repeated ‘caregiving’ interactions with significant others (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall 1978). Attachment orientations, in turn, influence a wide range of attitudes and behaviors (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). We propose, in line with Kahn (1996), that effective, more self-reliant individual career management paradoxically depends on the extent to which employees experience consistently responsive, trusting ‘secure base’ caregiving in the line management relationship.

In this paper, we first outline an attachment theoretical framework to explain the nature and effects of employees’ perceptions of the line management relationship on career attitudes and behaviors. Second, we report the findings of two studies investigating the main propositions. Study 1, a qualitative case study, explores employees’ perceptions of the role of line managers in the career management process within a large UK financial institution, and examines whether employees describe this role in terms of attachment-relational (i.e. caregiving) constructs. Study 2 extends the first study to investigate, quantitatively, the associations between employees’ attachment orientations in the line management relationship,

trust in the organization, and career development activities, perceived career growth opportunities and turnover intentions in a large, international sample of employees.

The present studies contribute a new theoretical lens for understanding how the employee-line manager relationship influences employee attitudes and behaviors towards individual career management and planning, providing the strategic and international HRM literatures with insight into improving the effectiveness of devolution of career management responsibilities to line managers. We also respond to calls for more empirical studies of attachment in the workplace (Richards and Schat 2011), particularly in leader/supervisor-employee dyads (Game 2011).

### **Theoretical Background**

Increasingly, effective career management is seen as a tripartite partnership between the HR function, line managers and employees within organizations (Baruch 2004; 2006; Sturges, Conway and Liefoghe 2010). As HR departments are challenged to become more strategically aligned with organizational objectives (Guest 2007; Ulrich 1998), operational aspects of HR/people management are increasingly devolved to line managers (e.g. Maxwell and Watson 2006; Whittaker and Marchington 2003) who can deal more efficiently with day-to-day HR issues (such as individual career management) ‘at source’ using local knowledge (Larsen and Brewster 2003; Purcell and Hutchinson 2006). Thus, while it is still commonly the job of HR departments to carry out wider (more strategic) HR planning and to make available to employees desirable (and useful) career development opportunities (e.g. mentoring programs, secondment opportunities, formal and informal training initiatives), much of the individual employee career planning, management and decision-making is increasingly played out between the employee and his or her line manager.

Such devolution of responsibility for career planning and management has led to academics and practitioners calling for greater employee career self-management (for a review see Arnold 2001). However, while there is growing evidence that employers are increasingly demanding that their employees take ultimate responsibility for their career development, most employees still want and expect significant organizational and line management support in this process (Clarke and Patrickson 2008). Consequently employees and managers may face a difficult relational balancing act to avoid the extremes of employee over-dependence on the one hand, and too little line management support on the other. Little is known about the underlying relational processes that might underpin the optimal balance; hence, how to maximize the effectiveness of the relationship from a careers perspective remains unclear. We propose that attachment theory (Bowlby 1969, 1973a, 1980) offers a useful framework for understanding the interpersonal dynamics of support versus independence in the career management context. Attachment theory is a well-established relational theory from the psychology and personal relationships domain which explains how sensitivity and responsiveness shown by key relationship figures, including leaders/supervisors, shape individuals' willingness and ability to 'explore' their social environment independently (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007).

It is increasingly acknowledged that leader/line manager-employee relationships are attachment relationships because they share the secure base (i.e. psychological base-camp) and safe-haven (i.e. emotional support) functions of other key attachment relationships (e.g. parents, teachers) (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007; Popper and Mayseless 2003). Although most research has investigated the effects of leaders' and/or followers' adult/global attachment models/orientations (i.e. generic relationship beliefs) (see Mayseless 2010), employees also develop *relationship-specific* attachments to their line managers (Game 2008). Compared with global models, specific attachment models are often the stronger guides to individual

functioning within the relevant relationship context (Cozzarelli, Hoekstra and Bylsma 2000). Therefore, we expect line manager-specific attachment dynamics to be salient in employees' career-related interactions and behavior, over and above any effects of global attachment.

A useful starting point for understanding employee-line manager attachment dynamics within the devolved HR/career context is the 'paradox of self-reliance' (Bowlby 1973b; Kahn 1996; 2002). According to Kahn (1996; 2002), self-reliance within organizational contexts (e.g. effective individual career management) is only possible if an individual feels supported and protected by others with whom they have trusting and meaningful connections. Indeed, this accessing of a perceived 'stronger-wiser' figure during periods of uncertainty or challenge is functionally adaptive (Mayseless and Popper 2007), and line managers are often well-placed to fulfill such a 'caregiving', secure base role (Davidovitz et al. 2007; Kahn 1993; Popper and Mayseless 2003). Effective organizational caregivers, '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). Specific behaviors linked with effective caregiving in a range of relationship contexts include being consistently: aware of issues and concerns, understanding, accepting/inclusive, accessible, and working collaboratively to resolve problems (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Collins and Ford 2010; Game and West 2010). In a careers context, whether employees actually perceive the line management role as a caregiving relationship is unknown. Hence, Study 1 is exploratory and qualitative, assessing: *In the career management context, to what extent do employees describe and evaluate their line management relationships in caregiving terms?*

Over time individuals internalize the quality of caregiving interactions in a given relationship as an attachment orientation (Collins and Ford 2010) which contains beliefs and expectations about the relationship (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). When leaders provide a

secure base through consistent and responsive caregiving followers feel securely attached (Popper and Maysless 2003). In contrast, consistently insensitive, unresponsive caregiving engenders attachment avoidance, characterized by lack of trust in the other. Inconsistent caregiving is associated with the development of attachment anxiety, reflecting preoccupation with self-worth in the relationship (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Brennan, Clark and Shaver 1998). Contemporary measurement approaches (e.g. Brennan et al. 1998) operationalize attachment as two dimensions of ‘insecure’ attachment – avoidance and anxiety. Secure attachment is not directly measured but can be inferred from low scores on one or both dimensions (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007).

Attachment orientations are the mechanisms through which caregiving influences individuals’ emotions, cognitions and behavior – including exploration of the social environment (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). Consistent with the ‘paradox of self-reliance’, Popper and Maysless (2003) proposed that follower security promotes autonomy, creativity and other performance benefits. Conversely, without a secure relational base in the turbulent, new career environment feelings associated with attachment insecurity (e.g. self-doubt and/or lack of trust) may inhibit exploration of personal development opportunities (Kahn 2002). In sum, line manager-specific attachment orientations reflect the history of an employee’s caregiving experiences in the supervisory relationship (Game 2008), and they are expected to guide employees’ career-related behaviors and attitudes. This is the focus of Study 2. The specific hypotheses are detailed below.

## **Hypotheses**

### ***Attachment and career development activities***

As part of the career planning and development process, employees often seek, and engage in, opportunities for personal development within their organizations (e.g. Baruch and Peiperl



2000). Line management that supports internal career exploration, and minimizes motivation to explore career opportunities externally, is desirable for organizations seeking to develop and retain skilled employees (e.g. Aryee and Chen 2004). When leaders fail to act as a secure base, followers come to doubt their own self-efficacy, with negative consequences for performance and personal growth (Davidovitz et al. 2007). Similarly, insecure attachment, reflecting the perceived absence of a reliable secure base in the line management relationship, is expected to be associated with reduced confidence or motivation to explore and engage in career development opportunities within the organization (see Bowlby 1973b; Kahn 1996). In support, young adults with secure attachment (to parents) engage in more career exploration than insecurely attached individuals (e.g. Ketterson and Blustein 1997). Clients who perceive their career counselors as providing a secure base engage in greater career exploration (Littman-Ovadia 2008). Colarelli and Bishop (1990) found perceived mentor support was positively associated with career commitment, defined as ‘persistence in pursuing career goals in spite of obstacles’ (p. 159). And Maurer and Tarulli (1994) reported positive associations between supervisor support and employees’ levels of participation in organizational career development activities.

*Hypothesis 1:* Insecure attachment (avoidance and anxiety) in the line manager relationship is negatively related to employee participation in organizational career development activities.

### ***Attachment and perceived career growth opportunities***

Career growth opportunities concern employees’ perceptions of, and satisfaction, with their job as a means of attaining valued future career goals (Bedian, Kemery and Pizzolatto 1991). An effective caregiving relationship should provide access to valuable information and

support to assist employees in career planning and development. In contrast, insecurely attached individuals, with less effective caregiving relationships, may have less access to the relational support that could facilitate career management. Given this perceived lack of support, insecurely attached individuals may believe their current job offers reduced utility for achieving future career goals. Consistent with this, global attachment insecurity is associated with more negative perceptions of leaders' emotional and instrumental support (Davidovitz et al. 2007). Employees with insecure adult/global attachment orientations report greater dissatisfaction with opportunities for advancement in their organization (Hazan and Shaver 1990), and occupational therapy students with secure global attachment orientations are more satisfied with their choice of career than insecurely attached students (Roney, Meredith and Strong 2004).

*Hypothesis 2:* Insecure attachment (avoidance and anxiety) in the line management relationship is negatively related to perceived career growth opportunities.

### ***Attachment and turnover intentions***

Job embeddedness theory suggests that social relationships at work are an important factor in organizational retention (e.g. Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski et al. 2004). When people feel attached and emotionally connected to others in the workplace research suggests that they are likely to remain longer in their jobs (Richards and Schat 2011; Van Vianen, Feij, Krausz and Taris 2003). This is exemplified by studies of mentoring. Mentoring helps establish a bond between employee and organization (Aryee and Chay 1994), and is consistently inversely related to intended and actual turnover (Payne and Huffman 2005). Conversely, in the line management relationship, when caregiving is perceived as inconsistent (by anxiously

attached individuals) or consistently unsupportive (by avoidant individuals), employees may feel emotionally disconnected and be motivated to withdraw from their organizations (Kahn 1998), or explore alternatives. There are different ‘paths’ to voluntary turnover (Lee, Mitchell, Holtom et al. 1999) with many additional factors influencing actually quitting a job - including satisfaction with one’s current work role, perceptions of HR practices (e.g. rewards, equal opportunities, training) and availability of alternative employment (e.g. Guchait and Cho 2010; Hulin 1991; Mobley, Griffith, Hand and Meglino, 1979). Moreover, consistent with the ‘paradox of self-reliance’, felt security may be a pre-requisite for actual turnover. Nonetheless, Richards and Schat (2011) found that, controlling for organizational commitment, global insecure attachment was associated with increased intentions to quit.

*Hypothesis 3:* Insecure attachment (avoidance and anxiety) in the line manager relationship is positively related to turnover intentions.

### ***Mediating role of trust in the organization***

In any devolved decision-making system, the line manager is the organizational interface, or key agent representing the organization to their employees. According to Levinson (1965), employees ‘personify’ their organizations, generalizing feelings about key organizational representatives and projecting them on to the organization as a whole. Actions by agents are attributed to the intention of the organization and not simply the motivations of the agent. Supporting this, Miner-Rubino and Reed (2010) found that employee perceptions of incivility by their supervisors/workgroups were associated with reduced organizational trust and, in turn, increased turnover intentions. Similarly, perceptions of procedural justice (i.e. fair organizational practices) mediate the relationship between perceived leadership relationship quality and a range of individual job attitudes (e.g. Ansari, Hung and Aafiqi 2007; Tepper

2000). Hence, we propose that employees' interpersonal trust in the line management relationship, which is rooted in prior caregiving experiences and manifested as attachment (in)security, may shape perceptions of organizational trust, with implications for individual career management attitudes and behaviors.

Insecure (global) attachment orientations are associated with lower interpersonal trust (Mikulincer 1998). Because of a history of unresponsive caregiving, attachment avoidance is associated with strong distrust of others' dependability (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). Anxiously attached individuals' preoccupation with self-worth and relational closeness leads to over-vigilance of others' motives and constant acceptance seeking (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005); however, these efforts are often felt to be unsuccessful and consequently more anxious people are quick to perceive trust violations in relationships (Mikulincer 1998). Consistent with a transference or personification effect, Kahn (1993) observed, based on a qualitative study of social workers, that: '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).

*Hypothesis 4a:* Insecure attachment (avoidance and anxiety) to the line manager is negatively related to trust in the organization.

Organizational trust is at the heart of the career management exchange between employer and employee (e.g. Sturges et al. 2005). When line managers support employees' career development goals and needs, trust in the employer is maintained, and employees reciprocate with high levels of desirable work attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Robinson 1996; Aryee and Chen, 2004). As the key agents of the organization, through their interactions with employees, line managers must therefore seek to build employees' trust in the organization,

and facilitate (e.g. through responsive caregiving) individual career management strategies that are focused on developing mutually beneficial skills and competencies within the organization (e.g. through internal career development opportunities). If line manager-employee relations are poor (i.e. due to inadequate caregiving and insecure attachment dynamics), organizational trust may be lost, leading employees to become dissatisfied with their career growth opportunities and to limit organizational development activities, focusing instead on career management strategies that seek exit from the organization.

*Hypothesis 4b:* Trust in the organization mediates the relationships between insecure attachment (avoidance and anxiety) in the line management relationship and employee participation in career development activities, perceived career growth opportunities, and turnover intentions.

## **Study 1**

### ***Method***

Before testing the proposed model it was desirable to establish, by means of an exploratory study, the relevance of a relational and caregiving perspective for understanding career self-management in employee-line manager dyads. In Study 1 we therefore investigated employees' perceptions of line managers' role in the career management and planning process, and what employees expected in terms of this relationship. Of particular interest was the extent to which employees framed their line management relationships and career-based interactions in caregiving terms.

### ***Context***

Study 1 was conducted in FinanceCo, a UK financial organization employing over 15,000 people. Provision of satisfying careers and continuous career development opportunities dominated FinanceCo's HR and corporate literature. Several sophisticated interventions had been specifically introduced to support employees' careers and career development (e.g. online training, internal vacancies and secondments, careers counselors, development centers, mentoring, talent management programs and an annual career development review for everyone). Interventions were supported by a dedicated career management team within the HR function. This comprehensive approach to managing careers fits with best practice in the literature, with access, support and opportunity for 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 study, 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 designed elicit contextually rich accounts of individuals' day-to-day 'reality' of organizational career management processes and practices. Interview questions focused on: participants' careers and career management in the organization; ownership of careers and career development; career planning and management processes in FinanceCo; and experiences and perceptions of participants' interpersonal relationship with their line manager. Interviews were conducted in an appropriate private space in the organization (two were conducted via telephone) and lasted approximately one hour. With participants' permission

interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Supporting notes were also taken.

### *Participants*

Interviews were conducted with twenty employees drawn as representatives of a larger population in the organization that was previously identified by random stratified sampling. 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 white UK ethnic origin. Despite the relatively small sample, consistent with the saturation principle (Miles and Huberman 1994), by the twentieth interview few new themes were being raised. It was therefore judged that a representative range of employee perceptions and experiences had been elicited.

### *Analysis*

Interviews were explored using template analysis (King 1998), a thematic coding technique in which codes were developed both a priori, based on the theoretical framework (attachment and caregiving), and iteratively as analysis proceeded. For example, operationalizations of caregiving proposed in the literature (e.g. Ainsworth et al. 1978; Kahn 1993; 1998; Game and West 2010) were incorporated a priori into the coding framework, and themes were dropped, merged, or developed as coding progressed. There were two stages of analysis. In stage 1, transcripts were read several times before systematically abstracting and coding them into meaning units. Transcripts were coded at the concept level. Each coded unit represented a mutually exclusive relational theme that was expressed by a word, phrase, sentence or short paragraph (Miles and Huberman 1994). These codes were then reviewed and grouped into conceptually similar categories. Coding was conducted independently by both authors. Any

differences between coders were discussed until consensus was reached. In Stage 2, the coded text was examined with the aim of identifying shared meanings and interpretations (Bryman 2012) across participants concerning their experiences and perceptions of organizational career management practices and the line manager relationship.

## ***Findings***

### *Line Manager Caregiving and Career Management*

Consistent with the literature regarding self-directed career management (for a review, see Arnold 2001), a key interview theme was ownership and personal responsibility for career decisions and planning. While the career context within this organization showed all the hallmarks of organizational career management, that is one that possesses a sophisticated and highly structured set of career planning/management processes and career development opportunities (see context above), all participants asserted that ‘it’s up to me’ to influence the way their careers are ‘ultimately’ developed. In other words, while the career management processes and career development opportunities were in place, it was ultimately the responsibility of individuals to identify, access, and engage with, these processes and opportunities. Consistent with a relational conceptualization, employees also recognized the particular importance of their line manager’s support in this process. That is, career-management was perceived as a 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 positive views about their career management experiences in the context of the organization and their current line management relationships. As such, their accounts provide insight into characteristics of effective employee-line manager career management relationships, and the ways in which employees make sense of



them as more or less effective. When evaluating the career management effectiveness of their line manager, themes in participants' accounts paralleled several important behavioral components of effective caregiving (e.g. Ainsworth et al. 1978; Kahn 1998; Game and West 2010). In particular, *acceptance*, *accessibility*, *awareness*, *understanding*, of the line manager, and *collaborative* career planning and decision-making, emerged as important elements of the career management relationship. Table 1 summarizes these themes, their definitions, and examples of positive and (where applicable) negative experiences.

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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 between line manager and employee, emerged as the most important aspects of the career management relationship, with each of these themes referred to directly by between 8 and 12 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, awareness was proactively maintained through frequent informal interactions. Line managers were also perceived as interpersonally warm, accepting interviewees in terms of their career goals and aspirations. Notably, among the more negative accounts (provided by only three 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 negative example in Table 1 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.

In response to employees' career-related needs and concerns effective line managers were described as 'approachable' 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 positive comment in Table 1 illustrates, accessibility was perceived as not simply physical availability but also psychological availability demonstrated by willingness to 'listen' to employees' concerns regarding career goals and needs. If action was required to facilitate career planning, caring line managers also worked collaboratively with employees, providing them with voice and influence over decisions effecting their career management and development. In contrast, among the more negative accounts line manager *inaccessibility* and *lack of* collaboration featured. For example, one employee described how his line manager sometimes seemed too busy to provide career support and advice when he needed it. Another perceived his line manager as excluding him from participating in his own career development review - making decisions on behalf of the employee without consultation (see Table 1).

A smaller proportion of interviewees (just three), who described positive experiences overall, referred directly to the importance of empathetic support from their line manager. Here, line managers were described as able to understand career needs, concerns, and aspirations from the perspective of their employees. Additionally, the attachment literature emphasizes the importance of *consistency* in the provision of sensitive, responsive caregiving (e.g. Ainsworth et al. 1978; Game and West 2010; Kahn 1998). In this study, while interviewees did not refer directly to line manager consistency in interactions, this appeared implicit in accounts of those experiencing more effective relationships by frequent use of the word 'always' in relation to the other dimensions of caregiving.

Finally, although in Study 1 we did not set out to make connections between perceived quality of caregiving and employee outcomes, some interviewees nonetheless

reflected on the consequences of their relationships in ways that were consistent with the proposed attachment theory model. Some spoke of feelings of security and confidence that their relationship gave them: ‘I’ve got a good one [relationship now]... I’ve become almost like confident, kind of which is kind of something I’ve never experienced before’ (Frank, Diversity Team, 4 years’ service). Others spoke of career and development benefits, for example, ‘you wouldn’t be afraid to go and say ‘actually I’m not sure about this’, which all helps in any development you do’ (Janet, Relations Manager, 14 years’ service).

Overall, the interviews indicate that managing employee careers can be construed as a relational process in which the line manager is expected to act as a temporary *caregiver* to support self-exploration and career development activities by 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 based on perceived levels of line manager acceptance, accessibility, awareness, understanding and collaboration. There were also initial indications that perceived quality of line manager caregiving may influence felt security and career-related outcomes. While the importance of the line management relationship is recognized in the HRM literature (Crawshaw 2006), our findings go further to elaborate the specific nature of the relational processes underpinning effective relationships in a career context. These findings supported the adoption of attachment theory as a useful framework for further evaluating the career management process in Study 2.

## **Study 2**

Building on Study 1, the aim of Study 2 was to test more explicitly the connections between perceived caregiving quality and employees’ career-related attitudes and behaviors. Most prior work-related attachment research has been conducted in the US, Canada and Israel. It

was therefore important to conduct the quantitative study within a wider international context (building upon the UK context of Study 1) so as to better explore the generalizability of the proposed relationships, and hence the utility of attachment theory for explaining employee career attitudes and career planning, across an internationally diverse sample of working people.

Currently there are no validated measures of perceived caregiving in line management relationships. Nonetheless, because relationship-specific attachment models are grounded in caregiving experiences with interaction partners (Collins and Ford 2010), perceived caregiving quality is theoretically encapsulated in measures of attachment. Hence, we examined the associations between employees' line manager-specific attachment (avoidance and anxiety), trust in their organization, and career-related outcomes.

## ***Method***

### *Participants*

Participants were employed individuals enrolled on a UK university's Distance Learning MBA program. Following 3,300 e-mail invitations to participate in an on-line survey, 891 fully completed questionnaires were submitted yielding a response rate of 27%. Online surveys typically have a lower response rate than traditional postal questionnaires (Bryman, 2012). Nonetheless, the composition of the sample overall was representative of enrolments on the MBA program. Hence, the sample was internationally diverse, with respondents from 90 nations across North and South America, Africa, Europe and Asia. Participants worked in a wide range of organizations in the private, public and voluntary sectors. Average tenure in current post was 7.4 years, with 23% occupying director/senior manager level posts, 46.4% in other management roles and 30.6% in non-managerial positions. Mean age of the sample was 37.5 years, and 63.2% of participants were male.

### *Procedure*

Access to participants was negotiated through the Distance Learning MBA Program Director and local contacts. We used a web-based research design to administer an on-line survey. Despite potential trade-offs in response rate, on-line surveys offer key advantages in terms of instantaneous, widespread geographical coverage and speed of response (Bryman 2012). Participants received an invitation e-mail containing a link to an on-line questionnaire (SurveyMonkey.com). A further e-mail reminder was sent two weeks later. All completed surveys were submitted electronically within a one-month data collection period in 2010. Since participation in the MBA program required high-level English language skills the survey was administered in English. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. No course credit or other incentives were provided in return for participation.

### *Measures*

This study was conducted at the individual level of analysis.

*Employee-line manager attachment* was measured using the supervisor-specific relational models measure (Game 2008). Six items tapped attachment *avoidance* – i.e. reluctance to depend on the supervisor, and discomfort with closeness in the relationship (e.g., “I prefer not to show my supervisor how I feel deep down”). The attachment *anxiety* sub-scale comprised five items relating to preoccupation with closeness and self-worth in the supervisory relationship (e.g., “I sometimes wonder if I’m my supervisor’s favorite employee”). Responses were indicated on a seven-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  were 0.72 (avoidance) and 0.78 (anxiety).

*Trust in the organization* was measured on a seven-item organizational trust scale developed by Robinson (1996). A sample item is, “I believe my employer has high integrity”.

Responses were given on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.90.

*Career growth opportunities* were measured on a four-item scale (Bedian, Kemery and Pizzolatto 1991), tapping perceptions of the expected utility of the respondent's current job for attaining valued future career goals (e.g. "My present job is relevant to the growth and development of my career"). Responses were made on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.89.

*Career development activities.* Respondents were presented with a list of 11 of the most common career development opportunities (see Baruch and Peiperl 2000) (e.g., promotional opportunities, external training, secondment, special assignments, and education leading to qualifications). Space was also provided to list additional career development activities. Participants indicated which career development activities they had engaged in during the past two years. For each participant, the total number of experiences provided an index of their organizational career development activity.

*Turnover intentions* were measured with three items based on Camman et al.'s (1983) scale. A sample item is, "How frequently have you thought about leaving your current employer?" Responses were indicated on a seven-point scale (1= not at all; 7=extremely). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.89.

*Controls.* To evaluate the contribution of supervisor-specific attachment models over and above any global level effects (see Richards and Schat 2011), we controlled for global attachment anxiety and avoidance. Demographic data relating to age, gender and organizational tenure were also collected (Arnold 2001).

## ***Findings***

### *Preliminary Analysis*

Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations between all Study 2 variables are shown in Table 2. Significant correlations were found between the independent and dependent variables in the proposed model. Gender was not significantly correlated with any dependent variables and so was dropped from all subsequent analysis.

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Before testing the main hypotheses, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted, using AMOS v.19 (IBM, 1999), to check the discriminant validity of the five scale/ordinal variables in Study 2. Model fit indices were examined to compare goodness of fit of the hypothesized 5-factor model (i.e. five separate scales) against four alternative models. Non-significant chi-square results, CFI scores above .90 and RMSEA scores below .07 reflect good model fit (e.g. Bentler 1990). To assess the statistical significance of differences between model fit of the nested models we calculated the difference in model chi-square and degrees of freedom, and compared the values with the chi-square distribution (Hu and Bentler 1995).

In Model 1 all scaled items (supervisor-specific attachment anxiety and avoidance, trust in organization, career growth opportunities and turnover intentions) were indicators of a single latent factor ( $\chi^2 = 4915.52$  (275),  $p < .01$ ; CFI = .54; RMSEA = .14). Model 2 contained two latent factors, with items for supervisor-specific attachment anxiety and avoidance as indicators of one factor and all other items as indicators of the second factor ( $\chi^2 = 4233.19$  (274),  $p < .01$ ; CFI = .61; RMSEA = .13). Model 3 was the same as Model 2 except that the supervisor-specific attachment anxiety and avoidance items indicated two separate factors ( $\chi^2 = 3235.73$  (273),  $p < .01$ ; CFI = .71; RMSEA = .11). Finally, Model 4

tested the hypothesized 5-factor model in which the items for each of the five scales indicated their own latent factors. This showed good fit ( $\chi^2 = 1105.79$  (266),  $p < .01$ ; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .06). The poor fit of the alternatives, and the difference in chi-square statistics between the next best fitting model (Model 3) and Model 4, indicated that a five-factor model was the best fit statistically ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 2129.94$  (7),  $p < .01$ ).

### *Model Testing*

We tested the hypothesized mediation model using path analysis and bootstrapping (e.g. Kenny, Kashy and Bolger 1998). With AMOS v.19 (IBM, 1999) five hundred bootstrap re-samples were generated and significance tests were based on bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. Fit indices were again examined to explore the goodness-of-fit of our tested model.

As predicted, employee trust in organization was positively related to perceptions of career growth opportunities ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and career development activities ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and negatively related to turnover intentions ( $\beta = -.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Bootstrapping tests indicated trust mediated the associations between attachment avoidance and perceived career growth opportunities ( $\gamma = -.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), participation in career development activities ( $\gamma = -.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and turnover intentions ( $\gamma = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Trust also mediated the associations between attachment anxiety and employees' perceived career growth opportunities ( $\gamma = .04$ ,  $p < .05$ ), participation in career development activities ( $\gamma = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and turnover intentions ( $\gamma = -.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but in the opposite direction to predictions. These relationships between attachment anxiety and the other model variables, however, were only marginally statistically significant and given the large sample size in this study such small coefficients may not be meaningful or worthy of serious attention and interpretation (Allison, 1999).



Modification indices (suggested by AMOS) showed significant main effects between attachment avoidance and career growth opportunities ( $\beta = -.09, p < .01$ ) and attachment anxiety and career growth opportunities ( $\beta = .09, p < .01$ ) after controlling for trust in organization, suggesting only partial mediation by trust in organization for these variables (recognizing our earlier comments above regarding the statistical significance of attachment anxiety). This partial mediation model (see Figure 1) showed an excellent fit with the data ( $\chi^2 = 55.25 (14), p < .001$ ; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .06) and provided a significantly better fit than an alternative simple main effects model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 300.09 (1), p < .001$ ).

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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Overall, partial support was found for the hypotheses. Within this study at least, it appears that attachment avoidance (not attachment anxiety) is the important predictor of employees' perceptions of trust in organization, career growth opportunities, internal career development activities and turnover intentions. Employees' trust in organisation also to (partially) mediates the relationships between their supervisor-directed attachment avoidance and their career growth opportunities, internal career development activities and turnover intentions.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this research was to use attachment theory as a new framework to explore the nature and effects of the line manager role, in relation to one aspect of devolved HR responsibility - the employee career management process. In view of the global trend towards devolution (Perry and Kulik 2008) we combined a UK-based case study with an international survey to strengthen the generalizability of our findings. Together, the findings

reinforce a view of the line manager as central to contemporary HR strategy (e.g. Maxwell and Watson 2006). Although HR and career scholars recognize the importance of line managers in employees' career development (e.g. Bowen and Hall 1977; Crawshaw 2006), little is known about why some line managers are more effective career managers than others, or the implications of this for employees (e.g. Yarnall 1998). Applying attachment theory revealed that the nature and role of - previously acknowledged but under-researched - relational processes in the employee-line manager career management interface can be usefully understood as attachment and caregiving processes, the quality (i.e. security) of which have important implications for employee career management. Hence, these findings contribute much needed empirical evidence to the careers and attachment literatures, showing that (over and above global attachment orientations), dyadic attachment-relational dynamics are important in promoting broader trust in the organization which, in turn, has implications for the development of positive employee career attitudes and behaviors. The research also complements dominant career stage (e.g. Super 1990) protean (e.g. Hall 1976) and boundaryless (e.g. Arthur 1994; Rodrigues and Guest 2010) approaches in the wider careers literature by introducing a new relational/interpersonal perspective.

In Study 1, consistent with a devolved HR approach, employee accounts confirmed line managers as the key organizational agent in their career management process. More effective line managers provided the relational conditions associated with a secure base (c.f. Kahn 2002) on which employees could depend when they needed career-related advice, support or reassurance. Paralleling effective caregivers in parental and romantic dyads (e.g. Ainsworth et al. 1978; Collins and Ford 2010) more effective line managers were able to strike a balance between too much and too little intervention. They were aware of their employees' career needs and goals; were interpersonally accepting and understanding; could be easily approached for career support and advice; and worked collaboratively with their

employees to facilitate their development aims. In contrast, employees with more negative relational experiences reported line managers who were less interpersonally accepting, too busy to support employees' career and development needs, and/or tended to ignore or override employees' wishes.

Study 2 developed these findings to investigate the effects of employees' perceptions of caregiving quality in their line management relationships (via relationship-specific attachment orientations) on organizational trust and career outcomes. Employees with higher attachment avoidance, who perceive an absence of a secure base and low interpersonal trust in their line management relationships, are less satisfied with career growth opportunities, less likely to engage in internal (organizational) career development activities, and more likely to consider alternative employment opportunities elsewhere. These findings extend previous research (e.g. Hazan and Shaver 1990; Ketterson and Blustein 1997; Richards and Schat 2011) and highlight the role of relationship-level attachment in influencing career outcomes, over and above the influence of global attachment orientations. Hence, the nature of the relationship formed with the line manager may be more important than the generic expectations about relationships that employees bring to their job. Further, we found support for the mediating role of trust in the organization as a mechanism that can help explain how negative interpersonal processes in the line management relationship influence career outcomes. The associations between attachment avoidance and career attitudes and behaviors were at least partially mediated by organization-directed trust suggesting that, consistent with Kahn (1993), negative interpersonal expectations may be projected on to the organization as a whole, in turn influencing confidence and/or willingness to engage in organizational career exploration and reducing perceived career growth prospects.

Against expectations, attachment anxiety (in Study 2) was only marginally significantly associated with the other model variables and given the large sample size these

findings are likely to be of little theoretical or practical importance (Allison, 1999). What might account for this? Culture may play a role since many participants were from more collectivistic nations. Attachment anxiety may be more congruent with collectivistic values which emphasise belongingness, co-operation, and loyalty (Friedman et al. 2010; Triandis 1995), which in turn could reduce the sources of mistrust found in more individualistic research settings. Alternatively, specific-level anxiety implies that line manager's caregiving is perceived as inconsistent - sometimes responsive but sometimes not. Hence, support and a secure base are not entirely absent. Although this may cause some concerns about self-worth in the relationship more broadly, in the narrower career management context it may be that these worries are not severe or frequent enough to significantly damage trust in the relationship or organization, so career attitudes and behaviors are not significantly adversely affected. Further research is needed to explore this issue.

The main strength of the present research is that it combines insights from rich qualitative interviews and a large-scale, internationally-diverse quantitative survey. Nonetheless, there are limitations. Due to practical constraints, we surveyed only employees (not line managers) in Study 2. However, since attachment theory deals with intra-individual responses to perceived interpersonal processes (e.g. partner caregiving), it is common to study correlates of attachment from the perspective of one member of a dyad (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). Further, perceptions of supportive behavior in attachment dyads correlate well with observer ratings of actual support (Collins and Ford, 2010; Kirmeyer and Lin, 1987). This research therefore demonstrates the relevance of attachment in the line management relationship for employee career management but future research should examine line manager and employee perspectives together. A further limitation of the research is that all data are cross-sectional, so the associations discussed remain tentative until longitudinal research can establish causality. Longitudinal diary, or experience

sampling, research would be useful for investigating the development and effects of employees' relationship-specific attachment orientations following career-related caregiving interactions. Additionally, we had to use an attachment measure as a proxy for line manager caregiving. In future, development of a leader/line manager caregiving scale would enable replication and extension of our findings.

Although not a theme in the present research, the degree to which employees want and expect organizational versus career self-management may vary (e.g. Clarke and Patrickson 2008). It would be useful to explore how differences in employees' career management expectations influence perceptions in the line-manager relationship. Theoretically, amidst the greater uncertainty inherent in career self-management (e.g. Kahn 2002), expectations of line manager caregiving may increase, perhaps 'raising the stakes' and the potential for relationship dissatisfaction and insecurity. Besides measuring employee expectations directly, case studies in organizations with contrasting career management strategies would help explore this issue. Future researchers could also examine additional mechanisms through which attachment relational models impact career attitudes and behavior. Kahn (2002) proposed that line manager caregiving promotes greater self-reliance; hence research including indicators of self-reliance could be conducted. Finally, researchers could also explore culture and other individual differences (e.g. protean orientation and careerism) as moderators of the observed relationships.

This research has important practical implications. Employees view line managers as a key agent in their career management. As employees strive to plan and manage their careers they value line managers who are attuned, and responsive, to their needs. Specifically, effective career management relationships are a function of secure relational models (especially low avoidance) and interpersonal trust that develop through consistently sensitive, inclusive and responsive line manager caregiving. When line managers provide employees

with effective support for individual career planning and exploration, and interventions that help develop transferable skills (thus providing employability security), employers may develop trusting relationships and elicit the high levels of citizenship, commitment and performance necessary for continued organizational competitiveness (e.g. Herriot and Pemberton 1996). Conversely, when such caregiving is consistently absent avoidant attachment may develop. In such cases, the career management relationship may break down leading to lower levels of organizational trust and career satisfaction, and potentially the loss of key human resources. The present findings were consistent across participants from over 90 countries. It is essential, therefore, that the HRM function, whether domestically or internationally-oriented, supports line managers in their career management role by clarifying the important relational and caregiving dimensions that underpin it. Moreover, HRM must ensure that line managers are trained and supported in acquiring the knowledge and interpersonal skills necessary to fulfill the 'career-caregiving' role effectively.

In conclusion, the present research explored the utility of attachment theory as a new theoretical framework for understanding employees' experiences, and perceptions, of their careers and career planning/management within organizations. Findings suggest that attachment insecurity in the line management relationship (in particular avoidant attachment insecurity) may shape trust in the wider employment relationship with implications for career-related behaviors and attitudes. 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.

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Table 1. Employee reflections on line manager caregiving in a career management context

Theme	Definition	Positive Example	Negative Example
Awareness	Active awareness of how employees are feeling and of significant work-related and/or personal concerns.	I think she takes a personal interest in all of us, which is good... she is proactive in arranging and making meetings and taking an interest in her team, in you personally, what it is you want to do, where you want to go, and what training you feel you require. (Bob, Web developer, 5 years)	None
Understanding	Understanding situations from the perspective of the employee.	... 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 (line manager) was so supportive and sympathetic and without me making excuses or giving reasons of whatever, she was there (saying)... '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? (Janet, Relations Manager, 14 years)	None
Acceptance	Accepting employees as they are. Partly conveyed by interpersonal warmth.	She treats everybody the same, regardless of whether you're somebody who has been there donkey's years or somebody who has only just joined. Everybody is given	...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



		the same opportunity and the same support... she will listen to what I have to say or what anybody has to say and make a fair and informed choice on it and I think that makes people feel wanted, comfortable (Jill, Senior P&D Manager, 15 years)	current manager. (Geoff, Manager, 3 years)
Accessibility	Despite other demands, being accessible and readily available (physically and psychologically).	She is quite keen to be there for me, and for me to be able to approach her which is very important. (Carole, PA, 4 years)	... sometimes you don't always have the support there (for your career development) from like your direct line manager... because of, you know, the amount of (other) work they are doing. (John, Customer Adviser, 18 months)
Collaboration	Respecting employees' independence and ownership of a problem, not intruding or taking control.	It's like a two-way thing, it seems to work quite well...If we feel we want to develop our job in a different direction...they will always listen and review that. (Rita, Administrator, 8 months)	They don't really ask you if there is anything else that you'd like to do... I didn't realize that [my] career development review had been filled in [by the line manager], 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. (Frank, Diversity Team, 4 years)

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for all Study 2 variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	-	-										
2. Age	37.51	7.45	-.12***									
3. Tenure	7.40	6.52	-.04	.46***								
4. Global avoidance	3.15	1.02	.10**	-.07*	-.03							
5. Global anxiety	3.49	1.31	-.07*	-.16***	-.06	.03						
6. Sup avoidance	3.49	1.06	-.09**	-.04	.02	.32***	.18***					
7. Sup anxiety	3.78	1.18	-.15***	-.06	-.05	-.10**	.34***	-.07*				
8. Trust in organization	3.50	0.82	.04	.09**	.00	-.08*	-.14***	-.32***	.05			
9. CGO	3.60	0.93	-.01	.07*	.06	-.07*	-.04	-.29***	.14***	.51***		
10. CD activities	2.93	2.47	-.01	.00	.11**	-.08*	.04	-.18***	.12***	.35***	.34***	
11. Turnover intentions	4.22	1.84	-.04	-.13***	-.16***	.05	.07*	.24***	-.05	-.49***	-.57***	-.26***

Notes:

$N = 891$

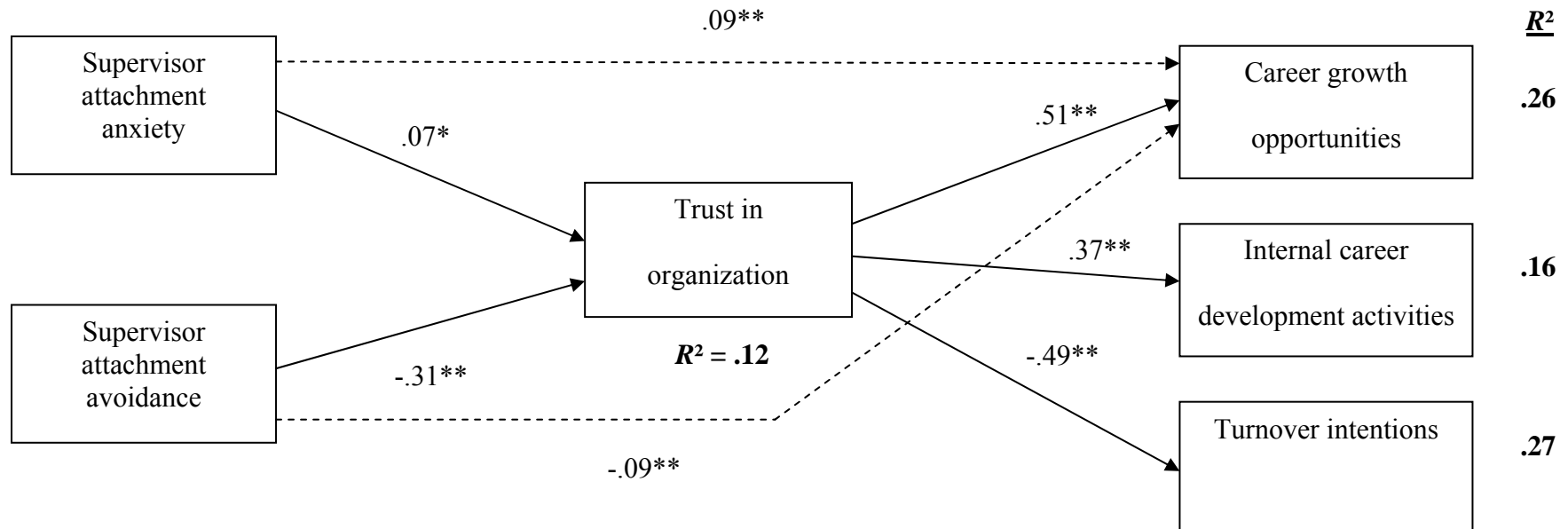
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Sup anxiety/Sup avoidance = Supervisor-specific attachment anxiety/avoidance

CD activities = Career development activities

CGO = Career growth opportunities

Figure 1. Model fit statistics, standardized estimates and R<sup>2</sup> statistics for the partial mediation model



**Model Fit Statistics**

**CMIN** = 55.25 (*df* = 14); **CFI** = .97; **RMSEA** = .06

Notes:

*N* = 891

\* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01

Controls: global attachment anxiety and avoidance, age and tenure

—————▶ Hypothesized pathway

- - - - -▶ Non-hypothesized pathway