

## Attachment theory in the workplace

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### ABSTRACT

Attachment Theory argues that a strong emotional and physical bond to one's primary caregiver in the first years of life is critical. Children that experience a strong or secure attachment bond with their primary caregivers may develop into individuals that possess a sense of worthiness and a positive model of self and others. Children that experience with a weak attachment may develop into adults that feel worthlessness and experience issues with trusting others. Attachment Theory proposes that childhood attachments can support or adversely impact an adult's ability to obtain and sustain relationships. As adult professionals, much of our careers depend on our ability to build and sustain professional relationships. Can our childhood attachment experiences ultimately impact our adult career efficacy? The following paper will define Attachment Theory, summarize previous academic research regarding attachment as an impact on career outcomes, identification of literature themes, identification of gaps in the literature, implications for managers and conclusions.

Keywords: Attachment Theory, Bowlby, adults, work, management

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## INTRODUCTION

Is it possible that events occurring in our childhood can have lasting impact on our adult relationships? Certainly, childhood events and childhood relationships can shape our perspectives and impact the way we view the world. John Bowlby (1907- 1990) was a psychoanalyst that believed mental health and behavioral problems could be attributed to events in early childhood (McLeod, 2017) and he was instrumental in developing The Attachment Theory.

To understand The Attachment Theory, it is beneficial to understand how Bowlby and his colleague Mary Ainsworth developed the theory. While in college at the University of Cambridge in the late 1920s, Bowlby volunteered at a school for maladjusted children and he found that many children who were self-isolating, remote and affectionless also lacked a stable mother figure. Influenced by these observations, Bowlby decided to study child psychiatry. As Bowlby's research advanced, so did his career and at the end of World War II, Bowlby was invited to become head of the Children's Department at the Tavistock Clinic.

At the London Tavistock Clinic, Bowlby met Mary Ainsworth. Mary Ainsworth was applying innovative methodologies that made it possible to test some of Bowlby's ideas empirically. Together, Bowlby and Ainsworth developed and provided evidence for The Attachment Theory (Ackerman, 2019). Their work is considered one of the most influential perspective on lifespan development and has broad reaching applications (Levy, 2013).

Attachment Theory is focused on the relationships and bonds between people, initially examining long-term relationships between a parent and child. With a healthy attachment, the child is confident that the caregiver will care for the child, this is a secure attachment and will help the child grow up to be happy and healthy. If a child cannot rely on their caregivers to respond to their needs, they may become very anxious and this can have negative consequences for the child as they become an adult. Bowlby identified that children with a secure base attachment have better outcomes than non-securely attached children in social and emotional development, mental health and education achievement.

Bowlby and Ainsworth identified the following categories of infant attachment: secure attachment, anxious ambivalent attachment (pre-occupied), avoidance attachment (dismissing) and the fourth added several years later, disorganized disorientation (fearful) (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2004)(Figure 1). However, Attachment Theory, takes it further, recognizing, adult relationships are often related to the care we received from our primary caregivers (Firestone, 2013). With that said, Bowlby believes some adult attachment behaviors can be predicted based on childhood attachment experiences. Many researchers agree with Bowlby and have contributed to a new perception of adult attachment (Ross, McKim, & DiTommaso, 2006), specifically focusing on avoidance and anxiety attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005)(Figure 2). Research indicates a two-dimensional representation as more accurate (Richards and Schat, 2011).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Attachment Theory is well researched and accepted in academic communities. With the importance of the theory recognized, many academics have considered, if childhood attachment ultimately influences not only personal relationship but adult work relationships and professional efficacy. The following will provide a chronological overview of a few instrumental research studies on this topic.

In 2001, Krausz, Bizman and Braslavsky conducted a study examining the effects of attachment style on satisfaction with employment contracts for internal, external or fixed contract workers. Questionnaires developed by Hazan and Shaver (1990)(Figure 3) were filled out by 194 persons. Based on self-reports, those with a preoccupied attachment style had a significantly higher preference for external contract, securely attached individuals reported the highest levels of job satisfaction, anxious/ambivalent individuals were higher in preference for the external contract and lower in preference for the internal contract and avoidant were lowest overall for intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction. This research indicates attachment styles can impact employee preferences for employment contracts and satisfaction.

Geller and Banberger (2009) chose to examine workplace attachment among co-workers, specifically, the impact of a help provider's level of attachment categorized on the two-dimension spectrum anxiety or avoidance. The researchers collected data from 430 call center employees and used two assessments, first, a peer rating similar to that used by Bowler and Brass (2006) to assess instrumental co-worker helping and second, a 36 item Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR) developed by Brennan et al, (1998)(Figure 4). The findings support that attachment style exerts a small but significant influence on work based helping behaviors over and above the effect of other individual and situational factors.

Renfro-Michel, Edina, Burley and Robert (2009) published the article, "The Interaction of Work Adjustments and Attachment Theory: Employment Counseling Implications," examining attachment theory and career development. For their study, they paired, the Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA) with Attachment Theory. Within TWA, it is recognized that employee relationships with peers and bosses create reputations that may build or diminish advancement. The authors found the integration of attachment theory with TWA allows for a comprehensive view of an employee and can support assimilation to the work setting.

Hepper and Carnelley (2010), applied two studies to gain insight into how attachment style impacts personal engagement with feedback seeking behavior. In the studies participants envisioned receiving feedback from a friend (Study 1) or from an expert (Study 2). In both studies, attachment influenced the type of feedback the participant pursued with securely attached participants seeking positive feedback and participants with avoidance attachment seeking negative feedback (Hepper and Carnelley, 2010). The results support the idea that attachment orientations, influence feedback seeking behaviors which can ultimately influence one's self-image (Hepper and Carnelley, 2010).

Richards and Schat (2011) also report on the results of two studies investigating employee behavior and adult attachment theory. In Study 1, the researchers apply the Big Five Personality Trait Assessment (figure 7) to measure participant traits and examine the interconnection between adult attachment and personality. In Study 2, the researchers examine the relationship between attachment and emotion management behaviors with an Experience in Close Relationships Scale (ECR)(Figure 4). The researchers identify that anxious types are more likely to rely on others for support, less likely to contribute through extra effort and more likely to want to leave when faced with challenges. Avoidance types are more likely to act strong in a challenge, regulate their emotions and look to themselves for support. Ultimately, it can be concluded that attachment styles can influence the way individuals deal with work stressors.

Germain (2011) published the article, "Formal Mentoring Relationships and Attachment Theory: Implications for Human Resources Development," to examine the co-worker mentoring relationship and attachment styles. Attachment styles were assessed through Hazan's and

Shaver's (1990)(Figure 3) attachment style assessment. Conclusions are presented in extended mentoring-protégé pairing scenarios based on individual attachment scoring. These detailed scenarios have the potential to expand our understanding of mentoring relationship dynamics and support predictions for the nature of interpersonal interactions based on predisposition towards relationship formation.

Vrticka, Sandler & Vullemier (2012) also explore individual perceptions of relationships through an examination of attachment style as they relate to emotional reactions in social and non-social settings. They tested whether experiences with attachment orientations are associated with increases or decreases in social and emotional processing within the brain. The study had 16 volunteers complete the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AQQ)(Figure 6) to assess an individual as avoidance (AVS), anxious (AXS) and/or secure (SAS). Next, the participants completed a dot display game where the participant identified dot grouping with more numbers. With each response, the participants received visual feedback of a smiling face paired with the word "won" or an angry face paired with the word "lost." While completing the task, participants were scanned using a standard head-coil configuration, an fMRI. Based on brain responses, the researchers found participants who scored high in aversion responded to positive social signals by experiencing lower activation of affective processes and that individuals with high anxious attachment processed socially aversive situations through brain system association with fear (Vrticka et al, 2008). This research indicates that adult attachment has some biological bases.

Crawshaw and Game (2015), in a two-study method, explore the significance of line managers within the organizational career development system and employee career attitudes and behaviors based on attachment orientation. Study 1 involved interviews with 20 employees and found that the participants, overall, perceived managers as "caregivers," necessary to support the employee development process. Study 2 involved online surveys completed by 891 individuals, finding that employees who experience high attachment avoidance in their managerial relationship, also report negative expectations of their own career potential. Based on this information, effective career planning, management and development in organizations is critical to creating a skilled and flexible workforce. In addition, understanding relationship development between manager and employee is important.

Researcher Schmidt (2016) examined perceived psychological contract breach and attachment orientation in a sample of 124 college students with employment experience. The students were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their perceptions of psychological contract breach and organizational commitment. Next, attachment style was measured using the Relationship Questionnaire developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991)(Figure 5). All participants asserted that they were responsible for their own careers. But they recognized the importance of their line manager's support in this process. The participants did identify common needs from their managers of awareness, acceptance, accessibility and collaboration. Understanding the relationship between an employee and the organization can give insight if an employee feels tied to an organization if the employee is likely to remain.

Yip, Ehrhardt, Black and Walker (2017) reviewed research seeking answers to questions "Why and how do people develop emotional bonds with others at work?" and "What are the characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of these bonds?" In their review, the authors found previous assumptions that attachment style is stable and consistent across all relationships

may be wrong. Rather, attachment styles may change with variations in people and settings. Further a person's attachment anxiety can decrease over time in a relationship with a trusted person. Ultimately, understanding attachment theory as somewhat dynamic provides an important lens into how feelings of security can evolve.

## **LITERATURE THEMES**

The literature supports several important themes. First, many researchers agree that childhood attachments with caregivers can have a lifelong impact on adult relationships (Shah, 2015). Certainly, childhood experiences with trust and relationships will shape one's perspective of themselves and others. Second, workplace relationships are influenced by everyone's unique perspectives on relationships including availability and trust (Sutin, Costa, Mierch and Eaton, 2009). Each person is unique, and they view trust, communication and care differently, their understanding of and experiences with these concepts will impact their work relationships. Third, a person's attachment style can impact their career efficacy (Wright and Perrone, 2008). Securely attached individuals are more often recognized as leaders, evoke greater trust and maintain generally accepted job attitudes (Harms, 2011). Fourth, managers and human resources leaders may benefit from the study of attachment theory as understanding this theory can help organizational leader's better support employee development and employee relationships (Blome, Bennet and Page, 2010). Through understanding of unique employee needs, customized opportunities for success based on natural strengths and abilities can be offered. Finally, contemporary research supports that attachment orientation can change based on environment and people (Yip et al, 2017). Adults can be securely attached in one relationship and insecurely attached in another, meaning all adults may experience some positive and some negative working relationships.

## **LITERATURE GAPS AND QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

Two gaps were identified in the literature. First, Yip et al (2017) uniquely recognizes the potential dynamic nature of adult attachment. The team identifies that an adult may have different attachment experiences with different people. This idea must be explored further. The consequences of labeling an employee as insecurely attached without hope for adjustment could have grave career consequences. A skilled manager may observe insecure attachment behaviors and as a solution, they may simply shift the employee to work with other people and this could easily result in greater efficiencies.

Also, many of the researchers were using the same questionnaires to assess attachment, the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR) developed by Brennan, Clark and Shaver (1998) and the Three-Category Measure (1987) developed by Hazan and Shaver. If global academics recognize these three tools as valuable attachment measurements for research purposes, would it be beneficial to communicate these measurements with management and human resources practitioners? If easily accessible, could industry leaders use these assessments in hiring and training to create greater efficiencies and support workplace relationships?

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS**

Studying Attachment Theory may bring benefit to managers. With awareness of Attachment Theory managers can begin to understand employee behaviors expressed through secure, preoccupied, dismissing and or fearful attachment. With increased understanding of their employee's attachment preferences, managers may be able to support greater efficiencies for employee communications, teamwork and motivation. Employees, like managers, may also benefit from the study of Attachment Theory. Managers can offer training to their employees sharing an overview of The Attachment Theory followed by self-assessments using tools like Hazan's and Shaver's Questionnaire, Experience in Close Relationship Scale, Bartholomew and Horowitz Relationship Questionnaire or Simpson, Rholes and Phillips' Adult Attachment Questionnaire. From the self-applied assessments, employees can reflect and dialogue on how their attachment styles may impact their preferred working relationships. Through study of Attachment Theory, managers and employees alike can gain self-awareness and awareness of the needs of others.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Attachment Theory is an influential theory that has evolved over nearly 100 years. Adults with different attachment styles vary in their perceptions of closeness and intimacy, their abilities to communicate emotions, their ability to handle conflict and their expectations of others, all of which can certainly impact one's overall ability to succeed in a career. It would be beneficial for managers and human resource professionals to understand attachment theory, so they have an enhanced ability to identify someone that is acting based on secure, pre-occupied, dismissive or fearful attachment. With an understanding an employee's perceptions of relationships, a manager can shape and support the employee to self-actualization rather than turn away from or terminate a potentially effective employee that is simply unsure of the trust level within the organization.

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APPENDIX

		Model of Self	
		Positive	Negative
Model of Others	Positive	<p>Secure</p> <p>I am okay and you are okay.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is self sufficient.</li> </ul>	<p>Preoccupied (Anxious ambivalent)</p> <p>I am not okay and your okay.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is overly dependent.</li> </ul>
	Negative	<p>Dismissing (Avoidant)</p> <p>I am okay and you are not okay.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is counter-dependent.</li> </ul>	<p>Fearful (Avoidant)</p> <p>I am not okay and you are not okay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wants approval.</li> </ul>



Figure 1. Attachment Theory Four Category Model (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

- **Secure attachment:** autonomous, low on avoidance, low on anxiety, comfortable with intimacy, not worried about rejection or preoccupied with the relationship.
- **Anxious-resistant attachment:** dismissing, high on avoidance, low on anxiety, uncomfortable with closeness, values independence, not worried about partner’s availability.
- **Avoidance attachment:** preoccupied, low on avoidance, high on anxiety, seeks closeness, insecure about the relationship.
- **Disorganized-fearful:** unresolved, high on avoidance, high on anxiety, uncomfortable with intimacy, worried about partner’s commitment.

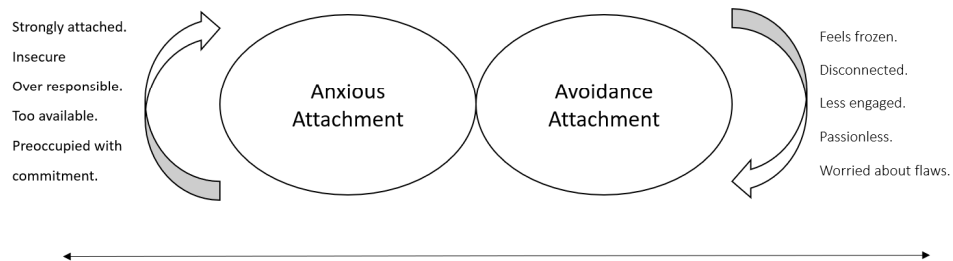


Figure 2. Attachment Theory Two-dimensional Conceptualization (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005).

- Anxiously attached adults experience a negative self-image, potentially causing overdependence in other people.
- Avoidantly attached individuals view others as unavailable, unresponsive, or punishing.

Hazan's and Shaver's Questionnaire		
A	B	C
<p><b>Secure</b> I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.</p>	<p><b>Anxious</b> I think that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or will not stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.</p>	<p><b>Avoidant</b> I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.</p>



Figure 3. Hazan and Shaver Three-Category Attachment Style Measure (Hazan and Shaver, 1987)

Hazan's and Shaver's measurement originally focused on romantic attachment with a three-type description. Participants read each of the three descriptions and then mark the description that best describes how they feel in a romantic relationship. Next, the participant rates their relationship styles to indicate how well each description corresponds to their relationship style.



## Experience in Close Relationship Scale - Short Form (ECR-S)

### Instructions:

The following statements concern how you feel in romantic relationships. Please respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
2	I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	I find that my partner doesn't want to get as close as I would like.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
6	My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	I don't worry about being abandoned.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
9	I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
10	I get frustrated if my romantic partner is not available when I need them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	I am nervous when my partner gets too close to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	I worry that a romantic partner won't care about me as much as I care about them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Figure 4. Brennan, Clark and Shaver (1998) created the Experience in Close Relationship Scale (ECR). Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt and Vogel (2007) created the ECR short form (ECR-S).

Scale: Following are four general relationship styles that people often report. Place a checkmark next to the letter corresponding to the style that best describes you or is closest to the way you are.

\_\_\_ A. It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me.

\_\_\_ B. I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.

\_\_\_ C. I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.

\_\_\_ D. I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.

Now please rate each of the relationship styles above to indicate how well or poorly each description corresponds to your general relationship style.

<b>Style A</b>						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Disagree Strongly			Neutral/ Mixed	Agree Strongly		
<b>Style B</b>						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Disagree Strongly			Neutral/ Mixed	Agree Strongly		
<b>Style C</b>						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Disagree Strongly			Neutral/ Mixed	Agree Strongly		
<b>Style D</b>						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Disagree Strongly			Neutral/ Mixed	Agree Strongly		

Figure 5. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) Relationship Questionnaire.

**ADULT ATTACHMENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Please rate the extent to which the following items are descriptive of your patient, where 1 = *not true at all*, 4 = *somewhat true*, and 7 = *very true*.

	Not true	Very true
1. Tends to expect that s/he can rely on the availability and responsiveness of the people who are important to him/her	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
2. Tends to offer sparse narratives about interpersonal events; appears unwilling or unable to describe interpersonal experiences in detail or to provide specific examples	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
3. Tends to worry that something might happen to those s/he loves, and to have difficulty with separations from them	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
4. Tends to use vague, meaningless, or empty words when describing interpersonal events (e.g., may insert nonsense words such as "dadadada" into sentences, use psychobabble such as "she has a lot of material around that issue," etc.)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
5. Shows signs of disorientation, disorganization, or dissociation when talking about traumatic events (e.g., loss or abuse); seems to lose the capacity to monitor his/her discourse to keep in mind the perspective of the listener	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
6. May lapse into prolonged silences, unfinished sentences, or stilted, "robotic," speech when describing traumatic events or losses	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
7. Tends to offer generalizations about his/her relationships that do not cohere with supporting details (e.g., may describe relationship with mother as "loving," but when pressed for examples provide specific memories that seem distant, hostile, or unpleasant)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
8. Seeks close relationships but constantly feels ambivalent about them	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
9. Tends to have balanced, realistic views of significant others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
10. Views him/herself as lovable and worthy of care	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
11. Derives a sense of self-worth from being independent and self-sufficient	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
12. Seems to be mired in, or preoccupied with, past attachment relationships (e.g., seems still to be fighting old battles with mother, father etc.)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
13. Tends to be controlling in close relationships, either through hostile, critical, or punitive responses, or through overinvolved, "enmeshed," or smothering care-giving	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
14. Takes an excessively pragmatic approach to language; has no use for "wasted words"	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
15. Strong emotions disrupt or derail narrative descriptions of events, rendering them incoherent, difficult to follow, etc.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
16. Is able to become emotionally close and express affection toward significant others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
17. Tends to speak clearly and coherently when recounting emotionally significant life experiences or describing important relationships, and is able to elaborate with relevant information and examples	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	
18. Tends to minimize or dismiss the importance of close relationships with others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	

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Figure 6. Simpson, Rholes and Phillips (1996) The Adult Attachment Questionnaire.

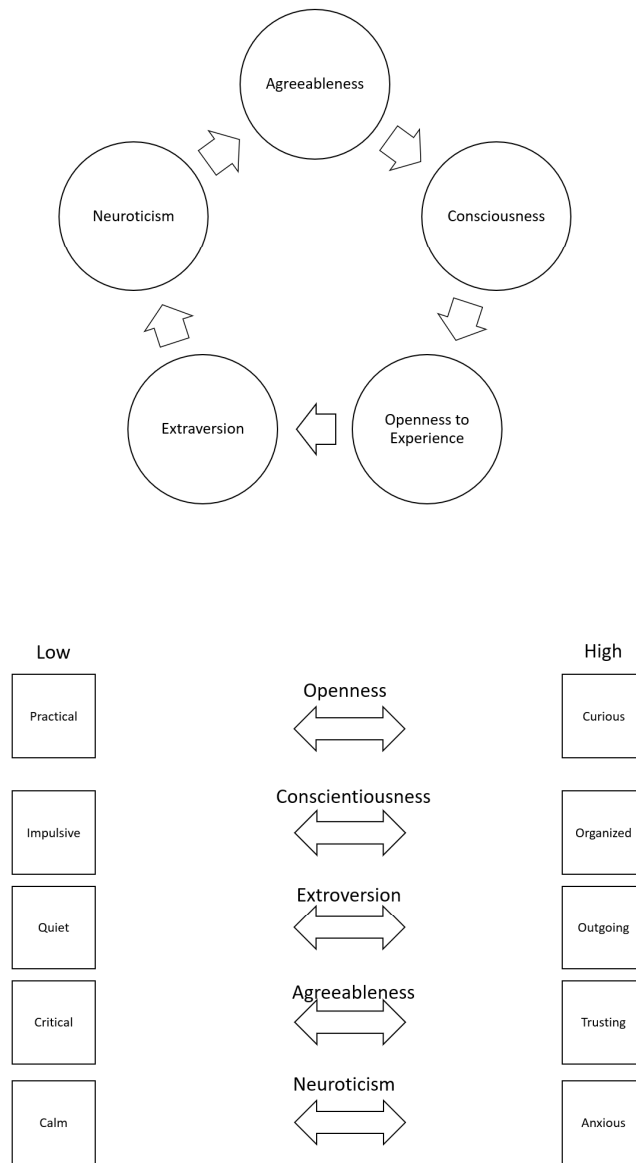


Figure 7. Costa and McCrae (1992) Big Five Personality Inventory.