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Are you my mentor? Informal mentoring mutual identification

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to understand the extent to which potential mentors and protégés agree that an informal mentoring relationship exists. Because these relationships are generally tacitly understood, either the mentor or protégé could perceive that there is a mentoring relationship when the other person does not agree. Whether gender affects this is also to be examined.

Design/methodology/approach – Individuals were asked to identify their mentoring partners. Each report of a partner was then compared to the partner's list to determine whether there was a match (i.e. both reported the relationship as an informal mentoring relationship) or a mismatch (i.e. where one partner reported the relationship as an informal mentoring relationship but the other did not). This pattern of matches and mismatches was then analyzed to determine level of matching and gender differences.

Findings – There is little agreement between mentoring partners: neither potential protégés nor potential mentors were very accurate at identifying reciprocal informal mentoring partners. However, gender was not found to be related to different levels of matching.

Originality/value – Previous work has not examined whether potential informal mentoring partners perceive the relationship in the same way. This has implications for employees who are depending upon their mentoring partners for support that may not be forthcoming because the partner does not view the relationship similarly. The findings also have implications for researchers, particularly when studying mentoring relationships from only one perspective and implicitly assuming agreement between partners.

Everybody who makes it has a mentor (Collins and Scott, 1978, p. 89).

This quote sums up what the popular press frequently suggests – that in order to be successful in the workplace, you have to have a mentor (e.g. Baker, 2008; Zachary and Fischler, 2010). Research on mentoring has supported the importance of mentoring to career success, as having a mentor has been found to be associated with many indicators of success (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Kammeyer-Mueller and Judge, 2008; Underhill, 2006). While many definitions of mentoring have been proposed (cf. Haggard *et al.*, 2011; Kram, 1988; Wanberg *et al.*, 2003), they all have one element in common – the dyadic nature of these relationships. Dyadicism implies a certain level of mutual identification by mentors and protégés (i.e. a recognition by both members that a relationship exists), but the degree of mutual identification in informal mentoring relationships has not been evaluated in prior work. Consequently, a critical question in mentoring research remains unaddressed: To what extent do “mentors” and “protégés” agree that a mentoring relationship exists? Given that most informal mentoring relationships are tacitly understood, either the mentor or protégé could perceive that there is a mentoring relationship when the other person does not perceive it as such.

Support for different views of mentoring relationships comes from the formal mentoring literature which has found that mentors' and protégés' perceptions of level of mentoring can be quite different. For example, Raabe and Beehr (2003) found correlations between mentors' and protégés' reports of amount of mentoring ranging from 0.01 for career development (e.g. coaching, sponsoring) to 0.21 for psychosocial support (e.g. being friends, self-disclosing), neither of which were significant. Although Wanberg *et al.* (2006) found higher correlations ranging from 0.14 (not significant) for psychosocial mentoring to 0.44 (significant) for career mentoring, these are still moderate relationships, explaining at best less than one quarter of the variance. This lack of agreement about the level of mentoring provided and received in formal relationships may extend to disagreement about whether an informal mentoring relationship actually exists

Beyond addressing the research gap, there are also practical imperatives for understanding mutual identification in informal mentoring relationships. If there is disagreement about the status of the relationship, this could be problematic for both protégés and mentors. If an employee believes that a more senior manager is his or her “mentor”, this employee might rely on that manager to provide protection and sponsorship – mentoring functions that take place when the protégé is not there. However, if the manager does not see the employee as a “protégé”, and, therefore, is not providing protection or sponsorship, the employee may lack access to such career-related support without realizing it. From the mentors' perspective, having fewer protégés may translate into possessing less power and influence than they believe they have, and may inhibit their ability to successfully build coalitions and lead the organization.

Therefore, this study endeavors to understand the extent to which potential informal mentoring partners agree about the status of the relationship. In order to do this, we draw upon a unique sample of informal mentoring relationship perceptions from both potential mentors and potential protégés. This allows us to examine the extent of mutual identification in informal mentoring relationships.

Hypotheses development

Why might views of informal mentoring relationships be so different? The social psychological theory of motivated cognitions provides one potential explanation. Assessments of relationships are subject to both cognitive and motivational forces (Hassin, 2008). In certain situations, individuals are motivated to positively bias their cognitive assessments in order to feel good about their relationships (Gagné and Lydon, 2004). In other words, individuals engage in motivated cognitions – cognitions which are consistent with motivational desires. For example, a recent meta-analysis found that partners in romantic relationships positively biased relationship predictions (e.g. future relationship satisfaction, relationship longevity) when compared to actual outcomes ($r=0.23$, $p<0.001$) (Fletcher and Kerr, 2010).

Motivated cognitions of mentors and protégés

In the case of informal mentoring, both protégés and mentors may be motivated to feel good about being in a mentoring relationship, and may, therefore, assess their workplace relationships more positively than their potential partners. Protégés may want to believe they have a mentor because the popular press frequently reminds them that mentoring is critical to career success (e.g. Baker, 2008; Collins and Scott, 1978; Zachary and Fischler, 2010). Mentors help their protégés succeed by providing career-related and psychosocial mentoring functions (Kram, 1988). Career-related mentoring focuses on accelerating the protégé's progress through sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection and challenging assignments, while psychosocial mentoring focuses on improving the protégé's sense of self, including self-confidence and self-efficacy, through acceptance and confirmation, counseling, friendship and role modeling (Kram, 1988). Although other factors such as cognitive ability are also important to career success (e.g. Kammeyer-Mueller and Judge, 2008; Singh *et al.*, 2009), meta-analytic data suggests that having a mentor is related to positive career outcomes (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Underhill, 2006). When compared to individuals without mentors, individuals with mentors had higher expectations for advancement, and higher levels of career satisfaction, job satisfaction, career commitment, organizational commitment (Allen *et al.*, 2004; Underhill, 2006) and compensation (Allen *et al.*, 2004), as well as more promotions (Allen *et al.*, 2004).

However, not all employees may be able to find mentors. Individuals who are not able to find a mentor willing to support them may resolve this contradiction by drawing on motivated cognitions and labeling what are solid workplace relationships as mentoring relationships. This could lead to a situation where the protégé believes that a manager is a mentor, but the potential mentor does not agree that a mentoring relationship exists. Thus:

H1. Employees will identify more managers as mentors than managers who agree that the employee is a protégé.

While informal mentoring relationships are generally believed to be primarily for the benefit of the protégé, studies have found that mentors also benefit from these relationships. In a qualitative study of mentors, Allen *et al.* (1997a) identified four sets of benefits that mentors receive: building a support network, getting satisfaction from helping their protégés, improving their careers through better performance and organizational rewards, and helping the organization/society more broadly. These categories are similar to benefits found by other researchers who have examined benefits for mentors (Kram, 1988; Ragins and Scandura,

1999; Zey, 1984). Supporting this perspective, studies comparing individuals who either are or have been mentors to those who have not been mentors have found objective and subjective career benefits for mentors. Mentors were found to have been promoted more (Allen *et al.*, 2006; Bozionelos, 2004; Bozionelos *et al.*, 2011) and have higher salaries (Allen *et al.*, 2006; Bozionelos *et al.*, 2011; Collins, 1994) than non-mentors. In addition, mentors in comparison to non-mentors had higher levels of career satisfaction (Collins, 1994; Johnson *et al.*, 2001) and subjective career success (Allen *et al.*, 2006; Bozionelos, 2004; Bozionelos *et al.*, 2011; Collins, 1994).

However, not all managers may be attractive mentors to protégés. Managers who are not able to find protégés may resolve this contradiction by drawing on motivated cognitions and labeling solid workplace relationships as mentoring relationships. This may result in a mismatch where a manager believes that he/she is providing mentoring but the potential protégé fails to consider the relationship as a mentoring one. Thus:

H2. Managers will identify more employees as protégés than employees who agree that the manager is a mentor.

In addition to an overall bias toward identifying mentoring partners, certain categories of employees may be more likely to use motivated cognitions because they are less likely to find mentors willing to support them. One potential category for which this may be true is women. Mentoring theory suggests that women should be less likely than men to have a mentor because of barriers to finding mentors including a lack of access to information networks and norms regarding cross-gender relationships (Noe, 1988; Ragins, 1997). However, empirical results examining mentoring from the potential protégé's perspective have found no difference between men and women in incidence of mentoring (for meta-analytic reviews, see Kammeyer-Mueller and Judge, 2008; O'Brien *et al.*, 2010).

It may be that motivated cognitions are the reason that theory and empirical results differ. If theory is correct, women are less likely to have a mentor than men. However, because women are likely to think they need a mentor to be successful, they may define mentoring broadly in order to believe they have a mentor – an example of motivated cognitions. In contrast, if as theory suggests men are more likely to have a mentor than women, men are less likely to draw upon broader mentoring definitions in order to think they have a mentor. Consequently, the percentage of relationships labeled by a potential protégé as a mentoring relationships where the potential mentor also agrees that there is a mentoring relationship (i.e. hit rate; Gable *et al.*, 2003) should be lower for women than for men. Thus:

H3. Women will have a lower hit rate than men when assessing whether an individual is their mentor.

A similar argument can be made for women as mentors. Theory would suggest that women are less likely to become mentors because of barriers to becoming mentors (Kram, 1988; Ragins, 1989). In addition, empirical work has suggested that protégés' objective career outcomes are better realized with a male rather than a female mentor (Bahniuk *et al.*, 1996; Ragins and Cotton, 1999; Wallace, 2001). However, studies examining motivation to mentor others have not found significant differences between men and women (Allen *et al.*, 1997b; Noe, 1988; Ragins and Cotton, 1993). Therefore, women may more broadly define mentoring in comparison to men in order to believe that they have protégés in the workplace. This would mean that the percentage of relationships a potential mentor labels as a mentoring

relationship where the potential protégé also agrees that there is a mentoring relationship should be lower for women than for men. Thus:

H4. Women will have a lower hit rate than men when assessing whether an individual is their protégé.

Research question

While it is important to understand the level of mutual identification in mentoring relationships, it is also important to understand whether agreement matters. In other words, what are the ramifications of mutual identification or lack thereof? It is possible that both types of relationships are positively related to mentoring satisfaction because mentoring received is not dependent upon what is actually provided (or vice versa for mentors). However, it is also possible that relationships where there is no agreement are negatively related to mentoring satisfaction because of unmet expectations. To begin to understand this question, we will examine how reciprocated and non-reciprocated relationships are related to protégé satisfaction with mentoring received.

In summary, using motivated cognitions as a theoretical lens for understanding individuals' perceptions of potential mentoring relationships, we hypothesize that individuals will be prone to overestimate the number of mutually acknowledged informal mentoring relationships they have. In addition, women will be more likely than men to have non-reciprocated informal mentoring relationships. We also begin to explore whether agreement matters to outcomes of mentoring.

Methods

Participants and procedures

Data for this study come from a regional office of an international management consulting firm that wanted to measure and recognize informal mentoring in the workplace. All consultants were requested via e-mail to complete an on-line survey asking them to identify mentors and protégés, as well as provide demographic and organizational data. Several targeted reminder emails were sent out in order to increase participation. Employees identified mentors and protégés using pull-down menus that listed the consultants in the region. The organization defined informal mentoring as:

What we mean: An elective, reciprocal relationship characterized by: a personal connection that is built and sustained over time; based on an understanding of the protégé's aspirations, values and skills; involves providing assistance through developmental feedback, role modeling, counseling, and/or opportunity creation. What we do not mean: a senior colleague whom you generally admire as an outstanding leader, but who does not truly have a personal connection with you; a colleague simply performing duties that are expected of them.

A total of 376 individuals were eligible for the survey and all of them completed it. This sample contained 24 percent women, and individuals in the sample had an average tenure of 2.8 years. 312 individuals identified at least one mentor or protégé. Of these, 294 identified at least one mentor and 170 identified at least one protégé.

Measures

Total mentors listed

This measure represented the total number of in-office mentors listed by a focal employee (protégé).

Mentor matches

This measure assessed the total number of mutually agreed upon relationships. A mentoring match occurred when a focal employee listed a mentor, and the mentor also listed the focal employee as a protégé. Mentor matches were coded as dummy variables (both list each other=1; focal employee lists the mentor, but the mentor does not list the employee=0).

Mentor hit rate

Hit rate was calculated by dividing mentor matches by total mentors listed.

Mentor mismatches

This measure assessed the total number of identified relationships where the mentor does not agree that there is a relationship. This is equivalent to total mentors listed minus mentor matches.

Satisfaction with mentoring received

A five-item measure assessed how satisfied protégés were with the mentoring they received from all of their mentors on a 10-point response scale (totally unsatisfied=1 to totally satisfied=10). Items queried employees on their satisfaction with feedback, counseling, role modeling and opportunity creation as well as overall satisfaction with mentoring received. Coefficient alpha for this measure is 0.84.

Total protégés listed

This measure represented the total number of in-office protégés listed by a focal manager (mentor).

Protégé matches

This measure assessed the number of mutually agreed upon relationships. A protégé match occurred when a focal manager listed a protégé, and the protégé also listed the focal manager as a mentor. Protégé matches were coded as dummy variables (both list each other=1; manager lists the protégé, but the protégé does not list the manager=0).

Protégé hit rate

Hit rate was calculated by dividing protégé matches by total protégés listed.

Gender

Gender was dummy-coded (female=1; male=0).

Results

Table I presents the descriptive results for this sample. On average, protégés listed a total of 2.56 mentors, but only 1.07 of these mentors agreed that a mentoring relationship existed. Similarly, on average mentors listed a total of 3.09 protégés, but only 1.85 of these protégés agreed that a mentoring relationship existed. In terms of hit rate, protégés identified mutual relationships 43 percent of the time while mentors identified mutual relationships 54 percent of the time.

H1 – that potential protégés would over-identify mutual mentoring relationships – is supported. Using a paired t-test analysis, total mentors listed is significantly greater than the number of mentor matches ($t = 19.05$; $p < 0.001$).

Similarly, *H2* – that potential mentors will over-identify mutual mentoring relationships – is supported. Using a paired t-test analysis, total protégés listed is significantly greater than the number of protégé matches ($t = 12.04$; $p < 0.001$).

H3 focused on the difference in hit rates between men and women when identifying mentors. Specifically, we expected that women would have a lower hit rate than men. This hypothesis is not supported. Contrary to expectations, women had a higher hit rate than men when identifying mentors, although the difference is not statistically significant ($b = 0.25$; $p = 0.23$).

H4 focused on the difference in hit rates between men and women when identifying protégés. Again, we expected that women would have a lower hit rate than men. This hypothesis is also not supported. Results reveal that the relationship is directionally correct, with women identifying mutual protégés 46 percent of the time versus men who identified them 57 percent of the time, but the test is not significant ($b = -0.42$; $p = 0.15$).

On an exploratory basis, we examined whether mutual identification is related to protégé satisfaction with mentoring received. Results of this analysis (Table II) indicate that mentor matches are significantly and positively related to satisfaction with mentoring received ($\beta = 0.20$; $p < 0.001$), while mentor mismatches are not significantly related ($\beta = 0.07$; $p > 0.05$). This indicates that mutual identification seems to be important to protégé satisfaction with mentoring.

Discussion

This study uses a unique sample to call into question the validity of the implicit assumption that most informal mentoring relationships are agreed upon by both protégé and mentor. It appears that neither protégés nor mentors are very accurate at identifying mutual mentoring partners. Protégés were accurate at identifying mutual partners less than half of the time, while mentors were only slightly more accurate. Interestingly, studies examining social networks have found similar results. In fact, Marsden (1990) concluded that across studies, individuals correctly identified friendship partners between 40-60 percent of the time – percentages similar to what we found in this context.

Of note, mentors were better at identifying protégés who saw them as mentors than vice versa. One potential reason for this may be because the importance of having mentors has received more popular press than the importance of having protégés. In other words, motivated cognitions may be particularly salient for protégés and influence them to classify relationships as mentoring ones when they are not perceived that way by mentors.

If motivated cognitions are a factor for both mentors and protégés, should this not produce higher matches of both types? Note that increased matching will only occur if motivated cognitions lead to random selection of mentoring partners. However, the pattern of mismatches does not appear to be random. A supplemental analysis examining the misidentifications mentors made revealed some consistencies within individuals in these perceptions. Some potential protégés never failed to reciprocate a relationship (where the mentor indicated a focal employee as a protégé, and the focal employee viewed the manager as a mentor), while other protégés failed to reciprocate relationships multiple times. Potentially, motivated cognitions are at work here as well. Certain individuals are probably perceived to be more valuable as either protégés or mentors because of their potential (protégés) or their power in the organization (mentors). Because these individuals are more valuable as mentoring partners, they are more likely to be the target of motivated cognitions.

Does agreement between the two mentoring partners matter? It does appear that for protégés whether there is agreement or not makes a difference; only matched relationships were significantly related to satisfaction with mentoring received. In addition, the standardized regression estimates indicate that the effect of matched relationships was nearly three times greater than that of mismatched relationships.

Interestingly, neither of the hypotheses suggesting that women would have lower hit rates than men were supported. In fact, female protégés had higher hit rates than male protégés did, although the difference was not statistically significant. Thus, motivated cognitions do not appear to explain the difference between mentoring theory and empirical findings concerning women.

These findings have important implications for the research and practitioner communities. First, researchers need to consider the implicit assumption they make when studying informal mentoring relationships. Most empirical work on mentoring is based on either the mentor's or the protégé's perspective (Allen *et al.*, 2008), and assumes some level of agreement from the partner. Given the prevalence of mismatched relationships, this assumption appears to be problematic and may have influenced the outcomes of previous work. A substantial number of non-reciprocated relationships were likely present in many of the samples, but counted as examples of mutual relationships because only one perspective was obtained.

Organizations need to be sensitive to mutual identification in mentoring because individuals are making assumptions about support from their mentoring partners that may not be forthcoming. For mentors fewer reciprocal mentoring relationships likely impact their ability to successfully accomplish their goals because fewer actual protégés translates into smaller and less robust networks for these managers. As a result, when these managers need support for an initiative or a change, they will likely overestimate the support that they can rely on from their protégés. This will impede their ability to make the change or successfully complete the initiative. For protégés inaccurately perceiving mentoring relationships likely impacts their career trajectories. If a junior employee believes that a more senior manager is their mentor, they will rely on them for the career-related functions of sponsorship and

protection, both of which occur when the protégé is not physically present. However, if the more senior manager does not view the junior employee as a protégé, he/she may not endorse the junior employee and may not protect them from organizational hazards. This would likely impact the junior employee's ability to be successful, especially because the employee believes that the more senior person is performing this role.

Our study has a number of limitations. First, the external validity of these findings is a potential issue because consulting is an extremely human-capital intensive industry. In such an environment, the importance of mentoring is accentuated more than in many industries. Second, the sample was quite imbalanced in terms of gender, which led to low power for conducting some of the statistical analyses. Although reflective of the organization, there were only 76 women in comparison to 218 men who identified mentors, and only 40 women in comparison to 130 men who identified protégés. Finally, we could not control for relationship length, which may partially account for the number of mismatches. Specifically, mentoring relationships in the initiation phase (Kram, 1988) may have a lower likelihood of a match because these relationships are still in their formative stages. In order to confirm that relationship length was not the explanation for our findings, in a supplemental analysis we re-estimated the hit rate while controlling for organization tenure (a proxy for relationship length given that the longer an individual has been in the organization, the fewer relationships he/she should have in the initiation phase). Results of this robustness check revealed that tenure was not significantly related to mentor hit rate, supporting our primary findings.

Overall, our findings raise several important questions for future research. First, what are the broader implications of mismatches in terms of outcomes for protégés and mentors across different types of organizations? Second, what characteristics of potential mentors and protégés result in mismatches versus matches? Finally, what interventions might organizations consider to close the mentor-protégé identification gap?

In conclusion, this research addresses an important question which has not previously been addressed in the mentoring literature. Specifically, to what extent are informal mentoring relationships mutually identified? We find that mentoring relationships may often be less agreed upon than implicitly assumed. This has implications for employees who are depending upon their mentoring partners, and for researchers, especially those who study only one side of the mentoring relationship.

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Total mentors listed	294	2.56	1.47	–							
2. Mentor matches	294	1.07	1.07	0.47***	–						
3. Mentor false alarms	294	1.49	1.34	0.72***	–0.28***	–					
4. Mentor hit rate	294	0.43	0.39	–0.06	0.72***	–0.64***	–				
5. Total protégés listed	170	3.09	1.96	0.05	0.01	0.05	0.01	–			
6. Protégé matches	170	1.85	1.84	–0.05	0.17*	–0.20*	0.21**	0.75***	–		
7. Protégé hit rate	170	0.54	0.39	–0.15	0.19*	–0.34***	0.28***	0.23**	0.68***	–	
8. Protégé gender (female = 1; male = 0)	312	0.24	0.43	0.11	0.14*	0.01	0.07	0.02	–0.03	–0.11	–
9. Satisfaction with mentoring received	294	36.10	7.37	0.14*	0.18**	0.01	0.09	0.14	0.15	0.11	–0.03

Notes: **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001

Table I.
Descriptive statistics

Table I Descriptive statistics

	Variable	β
Table II. Satisfaction with mentoring received	Mentor matches	0.20**
	Mentor mismatches	0.07
	R-squared	0.04*

Notes: $n = 294$; β is a standardized regression coefficient; * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$

Table II Satisfaction with mentoring received

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