

# Effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer–protégé affective organizational commitment: a self-concept-based perspective

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## Abstract

The study proposes and tests a self-concept-based perspective for the effects of formal mentoring support on affective organizational commitment (AOC) via multiple mediators. Using time-lagged multi-source dyadic data ( $n = 203$ ), we demonstrate that formal mentoring support significantly influences newcomer–protégés' AOC through an underlying self-evaluative mechanism indicated by organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), even in the presence of a well-established alternative mediator (perceived organizational support; POS). Moreover, we further demonstrate when or under what circumstances such effects might be attenuated or exaggerated by introducing a salient boundary condition to such a process (i.e., perceived mentor organizational prototypicality). As the findings reveal, by making newcomer–protégés feel good about themselves in the workplace (i.e., perceive self-value) formal mentoring support can also promote organizational commitment, effects that are likely to be amplified when the formal mentor is perceived to be prototypical of the organization. Thus, bridging the mentoring and socialization literatures, the inclusion of our proposed mediators and moderator and testing their relationships simultaneously not only provides a more nuanced view of the underlying mechanisms through which the effects of formal mentoring support are channeled to influence newcomer–protégés' work attitudes but it offers new theoretical elaboration and contextual understanding that we hope will prompt future research and be of benefit to human resource practitioners. Implications to theory, practice and future research directions are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

AOC, blue-collar workers, formal mentoring support, mentor organizational prototypicality, newcomer–protégés, OBSE, self-concept-based theory

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Newcomer socialization represents a process through which new recruits learn and acquire knowledge about their new job and work environment (i.e., the learning process) and seek social acceptance and identification with the organization (i.e., the assimilation process)

(see Fang et al., 2011 for a review; Nasr et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2017). One organizational socialization tactic that is frequently used to acclimate and transition newcomers from organizational outsiders to insiders is mentoring (Bauer et al., 2007; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Unlike group-based organizational socialization tactics (e.g., orientation workshops, team building), mentoring is typically a one-on-one individual-based tactic and can be formal (e.g., mandated by the organization) or informal (e.g., voluntary) (Allen et al., 2006a;

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Cai et al., 2021; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). In this study, our interest is in the effects of formal mentoring support, defined as an organizational program, in which the organization assigns a more experienced senior mentor (e.g., supervisor) to provide support, guidance, and advice to a less experienced protégé for specific purposes (e.g., orientation, knowledge sharing, career development) over a pre-determined duration (Chun et al., 2012; Wanberg et al., 2006). Understanding how mentoring influences the attitudes and behavior of *newcomer-protégés* is important because in addition to having more pronounced effects than other socialization interventions (Chao, 2007), research has shown that mentoring continues to be problematic (Ng et al., 2019). Not only has dysfunctional mentoring been found to have deleterious consequences on protégés stress, depression, and intention to quit (Eby et al., 2010; Kim & Choi, 2011), but it can also adversely impact the mentor (e.g., Hu et al., 2022). A more precise understanding is also needed because upwards of 50% of newcomers typically leave their new jobs within the first 4 months of joining (Bauer, 2010) and effective onboarding support is believed to be vital to reducing typically high levels of newcomer turnover (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Despite the important role that mentoring plays in the socialization of newcomers, prior work examining its effects in the socialization context is scant, in particular, the underlying mechanisms through which formal mentoring support influences newcomer-protégé work attitudes and behavior (Allen et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2021). Indeed, prior research on the effects of mentoring has mainly relied on three theoretical approaches. One stream of theorizing utilizes social learning theory and role theory (e.g., role clarity, task mastery) to explain the learning process associated with mentoring, including how protégés learn about their new jobs and the skills required by observing and role modeling their mentor (Blass & Ferris, 2007; Lankau et al., 2006; Pan et al., 2011; Thomas & Lankau, 2009). A second stream of work draws on social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity to explain relational outcomes associated with mentoring support, such as why protégés reciprocate with positive attitudes when they perceive organizational support (POS) (Baranik et al., 2010; Park et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2022), trust (Son & Kim, 2016), psychological safety (Chen et al., 2014), and psychological contract fulfillment (Haggard, 2012). A third line of enquiry draws primarily on self-determination theory in an attempt to explain how mentoring enhances psychological empowerment (Sun et al., 2014) and needs satisfaction (Wang et al., 2018).

Regrettably, while these approaches have led to considerable advancements in the field, several shortcomings remain. First, because their emphasis is mainly on informal mentoring in which the mentor-protégé relationship arises out of mutual attraction and is voluntary in nature, the related theoretical predictions and empirical findings are unlikely to be fully applicable or generalizable to the formal mentoring context. As scholars assert (e.g., Allen et al., 2017; Eby et al., 2013), because formal mentoring is organizationally orchestrated and differs in its characteristics (e.g., non-voluntary, regular meetings, an established duration) and content (e.g., pre-determined goals and assessment), this leads to differences in the way it is perceived and its

associated effects. Second, they also primarily examine mentoring in a non-socialization context which limits our understanding of the implications associated with newcomer-protégés' adjustment and assimilation into their new work roles and environment during socialization (Cai et al., 2020; McManus & Russell, 1997). In particular, it is not well understood how formal mentoring support may help newcomer-protégés 'define themselves within their new organization' (Allen et al., 2017, p. 324) and develop a sense of self-worth, confidence and value during their socialization (Pierce et al., 1989; Wu et al., 2023). Being organizationally mandated it may create additional stress and anxiety at a time when newcomer-protégés are already experiencing high levels of uncertainty and anxiety associated with their socialization (Cai et al., 2020). Third, a further shortcoming is that they also tend to overlook mentoring in the blue-collar context. Such an absence in the literature is unfortunate because not only do blue-collar workers make up a significant component of the labor force, but the nature of such jobs (e.g., repetitive work, less job autonomy, and control) is very different than other types of work (e.g., white collar) (Hu et al., 2010; Weaver, 1975). For example, according to the International Labour Organization, blue-collar workers make up over 30% of the labor force in high and middle-income countries (International Labour Organization, 2023) and in a globally significant economy such as China, the blue-collar workforce exceeds 400 million, representing approximately 40% of the national working-age population (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Moreover, research has shown that blue-collar workers experience the highest rate of mental illness among all occupations (Kalleberg, 2011; Shoss, 2017), have lower job security than white-collar workers due to economic factors and technological change (e.g., automation; Follmer & Jones, 2018), and often lack self-esteem and confidence at work (Chen et al., 2021; Saloniemi et al., 2014). Lastly, prior work often only considers a single underlying mechanism through which mentoring's effects are channeled in isolation, thereby restricting understanding of the incremental effects associated with different mediating mechanisms considered simultaneously. Thus, both scholars and human resource (HR) managers require a more precise understanding of how and when formal mentoring support influences newcomer-protégé attitudes if the design and implementation of formal mentoring programs are to be improved and achieve their intended outcomes, such as enhancing newcomer-protégé self-esteem and commitment to the organization, central interests of this study.

In an effort to address the above shortcomings, we propose and test a self-concept-based (McAllister & Bigley, 2002) perspective for formal mentoring support's effects. Because formal mentoring support essentially represents a means to help newcomer-protégés' become equipped and feel connected, valued, and motivated to contribute to the organization during socialization (e.g., Allen et al., 2017; Bauer et al., 2007), this suggests that it should be particularly beneficial to establishing newcomer-protégés' self-worth at work (Feldman, 2012; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). According to self-consistency theory, to the extent that newcomer-protégés develop this self-based evaluation, the lens through which they perceive their value in the organization via formal mentoring support, it should also impact their attitudes

toward the organization. This is because in order to preserve consistency and continuity in their self-perceptions (i.e., being a valued organizational member), newcomer-protégés strive to bring others to see them as they see themselves (Swann, 1983). Following Ajzen and Fishbein's (1977) guidance to align measures, given that formal mentoring support is organizational and that newcomer-protégés' socialization experiences have been shown to be related to the development of work attitudes and the likelihood of remaining with the organization (Bauer et al., 2007; Sluss & Thompson, 2012), we therefore examined OBSE, defined as 'one's self-evaluations specifically within the context of the workplace' (Bowling et al., 2010, p. 602) and affective organizational commitment (AOC). Thus, positioning OBSE as a salient mediator helps to explain formal mentoring support as a deliberate effort being 'orchestrated' by the organization in an attempt to assimilate and influence newcomer-protégés' AOC. Importantly, because perceived organizational support (POS) and OBSE have been shown to be positively related (Ferris et al., 2009) and POS may be a stronger predictor of AOC than informal mentoring (Dawley et al., 2008), we also include POS in our theoretical model to test incremental effects. Such an approach enables us to provide a more precise account of how newcomer-protégés may not only respond to formal mentoring support with AOC out of an obligation to reciprocate favorable treatment (POS) but also because they view it as an organizational effort that values them, thus enhancing their self-esteem at work (OBSE).

Moreover, in addition to theorizing that the effects of formal mentoring support are likely to also be channeled through newcomer-protégés' OBSE to influence their AOC, we also seek to understand a possible boundary condition of such a relationship. As self-evaluation theory further suggests, although OBSE can be shaped by one's work context, not all cues and information may be viewed to carry the same weight, thus influencing the extent to which they are internalized into one's self-concept and the resultant attitudes and behavior (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Because newcomers tend to generalize their identification with organizational insiders to the broader organization only when they perceive these insiders as being prototypical (Sluss et al., 2012), formal mentors being salient organizational insiders should be particularly likely to influence the formation of newcomer-protégés self-evaluation process (Ashforth et al., 2007). By incorporating work on organizational prototypicality (Sluss et al., 2012; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008), we reason that when newcomer-protégés' perceive that their formal mentors are highly prototypical of the organization (i.e., representative of the organization's values, goals, beliefs, and norms), they are likely to attach greater weight to the cues and information they receive from their formal mentors (Sluss et al., 2012) such that the effects of formal mentoring support have a disproportionate impact. Consistent with this logic, organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Eisenberger et al., 2014) suggests that employees may differ in the extent to which they view their supervisor as an "organizational representative versus independent agent" (Eisenberger et al., 2010, p. 1086). When the supervisor is viewed to share the organization's characteristics (versus acting on his/her own behalf), employees are

more likely to generalize their exchange relationship from their supervisor to the organization. Although prior research has examined mentor characteristics, such as competencies (Uen et al., 2018), emotional intelligence (Chun et al., 2010), and learning goal orientation (Son, 2016), insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how the agent's alignment with organizational goals, values, and norms influences the effects of formal mentoring. Thus, examining newcomer-protégés' perceptions of their formal mentor's organizational prototypicality should also help to explain variations in the extent to which formal mentoring support influences newcomer-protégés' OBSE beyond POS.

The study contributes to the mentoring and socialization literatures in several ways. First, by proposing and testing a self-concept-based perspective for understanding a psychological mechanism (OBSE) through which formal mentoring support influences newcomer-protégé AOC, we reveal effects beyond social exchange-based explanations as drivers of newcomers' adjustment and assimilation (e.g. Ramarajan & Reid, 2020; Schaubroeck et al., 2013) and work attitudes (e.g. Allen & Shanock, 2013; Lapointe et al., 2014). Whereas prior research helps us to understand why protégés might reciprocate positively to an organization, for example, in return for the support they perceive from mentoring, we reveal that by making newcomer-protégés perceive self-value (i.e., feel good about themselves) in the workplace that formal mentoring support can also engender positive attitudes toward the organization. The study therefore provides a more intricate understanding of the different pathways (OBSE vs. POS) through which the effects of formal mentoring support are transmitted and responds to calls from scholars (Allen et al., 2017) to bridge the mentoring and socialization literatures. Such theoretical elaboration (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017) is particularly salient given that the early socialization experience is crucial to shaping the initial self-concept of newcomers (Pierce & Gardner, 2004) and that OBSE is an important proximal outcome of organizational socialization (Gardner et al., 2022). Second, by introducing an important boundary condition to the effects of formal mentoring support, we further explicate when or under what circumstances newcomer-protégés' OBSE might be exacerbated or weakened. Although prior research recognizes mentors as important socializing agents who have the potential to influence newcomer-protégé work attitudes, insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how individual-level mentor characteristics influence the extent to which newcomer-protégés' perceptions of mentoring (enacted by mentors) can be generalized to the organization. In this manner, we build on Eisenberger et al.'s (2010, p. 1086) suggestion that "employees see supervisors not only as organizational agents but also as individuals in their own right, with characteristics that differ in degree of similarity with those of the organization." Thus, when newcomer-protégés view their formal mentors as highly representative of the organization's intentions and efforts, the formal mentoring support is likely to strengthen their belief that they are valued by the organization, hence enhancing their OBSE. Finally, by examining the effects of formal mentoring support on blue-collar newcomer-protégés, we provide contextual understanding into an important but relatively neglected area of the

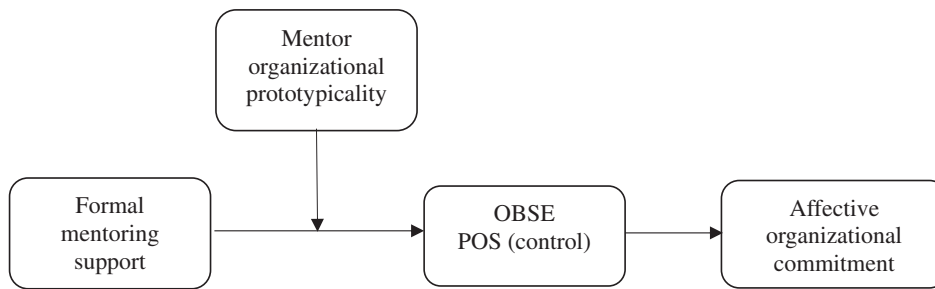


FIGURE 1 The conceptual model.

literature. As scholars maintain (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017), examining human behavior and organizational phenomenon in different contexts is important to both theoretical and empirical advancement for at least two reasons. First, context can significantly impact individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior in the workplace as well as how an organization functions as a whole (Johns, 2006, Johns, 2017). Second, research is often limited in its applicability to organizational practices and interventions due to its lack of consideration of different contexts (Johns, 2018; Rynes et al., 2001). Thus, examining the implications of different contexts (i.e., formal mentoring support, newcomer–protégé socialization, blue-collar workers) is meaningful because it can help the field develop and refine more robust and applicable theories (i.e., theoretical elaboration) that better reflect real-world complexities and potentially capture new findings, thereby not only advancing theory but providing HR managers with context-specific guidance on how to improve the effectiveness of their formal mentoring program design and implementation. Such an approach also adds to meta-analysis (e.g., Eby et al., 2013) by revealing why the efficacy of formal mentoring support may vary across different occupations and industries. Our conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1.

## 2 | THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

### 2.1 | Understanding the formal mentoring support of newcomer–protégés

To facilitate socialization, formal mentoring support typically involves a newly recruited organizational member (i.e., newcomer–protégé) being assigned to a more senior or experienced organizational organization (i.e., formal mentor) who then provides ongoing guidance and advice for a specific duration (e.g., 1 year) to help the newcomer–protégé adjust and acclimate to the new work role and environment (Chao, 2007; Chun et al., 2012). In addition to job-, organization-, and career-related guidance, social integration into the new organization is also considered essential (Fang et al., 2011). Unlike informal mentoring which tends to be unstructured, voluntary, self-initiated, based on mutual attraction, and can end at any time at the behest of either party, formal mentoring is designed, structured, and implemented by the organization according to a set of established guidelines, procedures, and schedules for mentors and protégés to follow

(e.g., mentor–protégé matching criteria, progress reports, milestones). Because newcomers often experience a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty as they seek to establish themselves as valued members in their new organization (Bauer et al., 2007; Griffin et al., 2000), formal mentoring support, with its clear and established institutional arrangements, can represent a salient approach to on-boarding and connecting newcomer–protégés to the organization psychologically (Allen et al., 2017; Chao, 2007).

### 2.2 | Formal mentoring support and AOC

Defined as “an emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67), AOC has been shown to be an important and desirable outcome of mentoring (e.g. Chen et al., 2014; Chun et al., 2012; Donaldson et al., 2000; Ghosh et al., 2012; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017; Payne & Huffman, 2005). When protégés feel a sense of attachment, loyalty, and identification with their organization, they are more likely to remain with the organization and contribute positively to its goals and objectives (e.g., lower turnover intention, higher job satisfaction, improved job performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors) (Kim et al., 2016; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Ng & Feldman, 2011; Wong et al., 2002). However, although scholars have identified a positive relationship between mentoring and AOC, the underlying mechanisms through which the effects are transmitted are comparably less well understood (Chen et al., 2014). For example, while a good deal of work has utilized social exchange theory in an effort to help us understand how favorable treatment by an organizational agent (e.g., mentor) may enhance protégés' positive perceptions of the organization (i.e., POS) (e.g. Baranik et al., 2010; Hu et al., 2014; Park et al., 2016) and encourage reciprocity in the form of increased organizational commitment (Baranik et al., 2010), we argue that exchange is unlikely to be the only mechanism explaining why formal mentoring support promotes organizational commitment. Specifically, given that OBSE represents an important psychological outcome of organizational socialization and is associated with successful psychological socialization adjustment (Gardner et al., 2022), examining how the effects of formal mentoring support might be channeled through OBSE to influence newcomer–protégés assimilation (i.e., AOC) during organizational socialization is likely to provide a salient alternative psychological-based explanation (Lee & Peccei, 2007).

### 2.3 | The mediating role of OBSE

OBSE reflects “the perceived self-value that individuals have of themselves as organizational members acting within an organizational context” (Pierce et al., 1989, p. 625). According to self-concept-based theory, individuals' self-evaluations at work can be shaped by one's work context, including organizational policies and practices (e.g., newcomer socialization and mentoring programs) that impact employee experiences and perceptions (Gardner et al., 2022; McAllister & Bigley, 2002). Following the above logic and by drawing on self-consistency theory, we predict the mediating role of OBSE, as follows. First, self-perceptions are highly influenced by individuals' social standing, logic central to the looking-glass argument (Cooley, 1972), whereby individuals construct images of themselves based upon how they believe others view them. Because formal mentoring support essentially represents that an organization views newcomer-protégés positively (i.e., protégés are valued and worthy members deserved of organizational attention and effort), recipients of formal mentoring support are likely to feel valued by the organization (Ghosh et al., 2012; Seibert, 1999). Accordingly, if a newcomer-protégé perceives that the organization is acting favorably toward him/her, then his/her self-esteem at work should reflect that in time (Ferris et al., 2012). Being provided with formal mentoring support conveys and signals (cues) to newcomer-protégés that they are valuable organizational members, and when they are assigned to a more senior and experienced organizational member (exposure and visibility) during socialization, they are likely to feel respected and important, thereby fostering their OBSE (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). As prior research suggests, when employees feel respected and trusted at work they are more likely to develop higher levels of OBSE (Lau et al., 2014).

Second, thoughts and feelings that newcomers have about themselves can also be shaped by their new job experiences (Cable & Kay, 2012). Faced with uncertainty and anxiety during the process of socialization, newcomer-protégés seek information and attempt to make sense of cues provided by the organization (Morrison, 1993). Because positive information and experiences in the organization can be self-reinforcing and lead to a positive sense of self-worth that one is a valuable and contributing organizational member, organizational efforts to facilitate newcomer-protégé's socialization (e.g., formal mentoring support) create meaningful experiences for newcomers who have the potential to influence the development of their OBSE (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). A formal mentor's work-related guidance, career advice, information exchange, and feedback not only increase newcomer-protégés' work competence but also provides them with self-references through which they perceive themselves and form their self-esteem specific to the organizational context (Korman, 1970; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). As a consequence, newcomer-protégés are likely to feel capable and confident in dealing with their new work roles, hence helping them to develop a higher level of self-esteem at work. Moreover, a recipient of formal mentoring support (e.g., psychological mentoring functions) should also feel meaningful and valuable in the workplace, feelings that are a direct reflection of being included and accepted at work (Leary et al., 1995).

In other words, because formal mentoring support contains cues and social information that can bolster newcomer-protégés' role, social image, and confidence in the organization (Ashforth et al., 2007), the incorporation of such positive information into a newcomer-protégé's self-concept leads to enhanced OBSE, thus reflecting one's self-perceived value (e.g., capable, confident, significant, and worthy) as an organizational member (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). To the extent that formal mentoring support influences newcomer-protégés' OBSE, the lens through which they perceive their work value in the organization, it should also impact their attitudes toward the organization because individuals strive to preserve consistency and continuity in their self-perceptions by bringing others to see them as they see themselves (Swann Jr., 1983).

According to self-consistency theory, as our self-esteem in a domain varies, so too do our attitudes, that is, we try to act in a manner consistent with our self-perceptions. When newcomer-protégés' self-views are influenced positively by formal mentoring support provided by the organization, in order to act and behave in a manner consistent with their self-perceptions, they are likely to demonstrate positive work attitudes directed at the organization (Bowling et al., 2010; Korman, 1970; Liu et al., 2013). Newcomer-protégés with a higher level of OBSE perceive that they play a valuable, meaningful, and competent role in the organization, such that a positive self-concept is likely to engender positive work attitudes and motivate high OBSE newcomer-protégés to be more committed to the organization (Korman, 1970; Swann, 1983) because individuals behave according to their self-evaluation in striving for self-consistency (Korman, 1970; Liu et al., 2013). Following this cognitive consistency logic, newcomer-protégés with positive self-images are likely to demonstrate positive attitudes that reinforce these images and such beliefs should motivate the corresponding attitudes. Thus, newcomer-protégés with high OBSE should be motivated to contribute to the organization by demonstrating high AOC. As far as AOC is valued by the organization, it is likely that newcomer-protégés' perceived self-worth induced by OBSE will promote their willingness to be highly committed to their organization.

**Hypothesis 1.** Newcomer-protégés' OBSE mediates the effects of formal mentoring support on their AOC.

### 2.4 | The moderating effect of formal mentor organizational prototypicality

We further predict that the effect of formal mentoring support on newcomer-protégés' OBSE will be contingent on how they perceive their mentor's organizational prototypicality. As socialization scholars assert (Cable & Parsons, 2001, p. 2), newcomers who find themselves in a new environment “do not possess comfortable routines for handling interactions and predicting the responses of others.” Instead, they make sense of their new work roles and environment and respond to actions or events using “people processing” tactics (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977) and seek information about why people



behave as they do (Jones, 1986). We argue that because formal mentors represent significant others in the localized context who act as “conduits to the organization” (Ashforth et al., 2007, p.39) and play a fundamental role in helping newcomers make sense of their new work roles and environment during the socialization process (e.g., Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993; Payne & Huffman, 2005), that the effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer–protégés' OBSE are likely to vary according to the extent to which a mentor is perceived to be a typical versus non-typical agent of the organization. Organizational prototypicality reflects the extent to which an organizational member (e.g., formal mentor) is viewed to be “a typical and exemplary representative of sharing and promoting the collective” (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008, p. 816) organization's goals, values, and beliefs (Sluss et al., 2012; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). In other words, the more prototypical an individual (e.g., a formal mentor) is with his/her organization, the more likely he/she will be to act and behave in ways that demonstrate and foster the goals, values, and beliefs of the organization and exhibit “behaviors that promote core organizational values” (Sluss et al., 2012, p. 951). Thus, when a newcomer–protégé perceives his/her formal mentor's words and actions are closely aligned with those of the organization (i.e., perceived high mentor prototypicality), he/she is likely to attach greater weight to the cues and information received and internalized from the formal mentor about organizational goals, values, and beliefs, thereby strengthening the effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer–protégés' OBSE. Supporting such reasoning, Yang et al. (2013) found that mentors who demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the organization's attributes (e.g., values, goals, language, history, performance needs) were more likely to act as organizational role models and be perceived by their protégés as trustworthy and respectful.

Moreover, the opportunity to interact with an experienced organizational member assigned by the organization (e.g., a formal mentor) is likely to signal to an individual (e.g., newcomer–protégé) that they are valued by the organization and worthy of its attention, concern, and effort (Bowling et al., 2010). Correspondingly, when a formal mentor is perceived as demonstrating high organizational prototypicality, the impact of formal mentoring support on newcomer–protégé OBSE should be enhanced not only because a prototypical mentor confers confidence in what the newcomer–protégé perceives but also because it reinforces his/her perceptions about self-worth at work. According to scholars (e.g., Hogg & Terry, 2000), prototypes reduce uncertainty and furnish consensual validation for one's self-concept. Hence, newcomer–protégés who face uncertainty and anxiety during their socialization are likely to be attracted to and shaped by formal mentors with a high degree of organizational prototypicality when forming their self-perceptions. As prior research suggests, when individuals receive and internalize organizational values into their self-concept, they are more likely to feel consistent with the organization and perceive higher OBSE (Chen & Aryee, 2007). Further, as Haslam et al. (2011, p. 90) contend, when leaders are perceived as prototypical, they “are not only seen as better leaders but also more effective in getting us to do things and *in making us feel good about those things.*” Following the above logic, because formal mentoring support

signals to newcomer–protégés that the organization is concerned and willing to invest in nurturing and developing their potential, the more prototypical a formal mentor is, the more he/she will be viewed to represent what the organization stands for and the stronger the related cues and information will be perceived and internalized, thereby amplifying the effects of formal mentoring support on OBSE.

**Hypothesis 2.** Perceived mentor organizational prototypicality will moderate the relationship between formal mentoring support and newcomer–protégés' OBSE such that the relationship is stronger when perceived mentor organizational prototypicality is high.

## 2.5 | A moderated mediation effect

Thus far, we have developed the theoretical underpinnings for the mediating effect of newcomer–protégés' OBSE between formal mentoring support and AOC as well as the moderating effect of perceived mentor organizational prototypicality on the formal mentoring support–newcomer–protégés' OBSE relationship. In other words, newcomer–protégés with high levels of OBSE are more likely to exhibit AOC and when newcomer–protégés perceive that their mentor's organizational prototypicality is high, they are more likely to feel that their OBSE is being enhanced. Hence, the theoretical rationales supporting the above predictions suggest a first-stage moderated mediation model (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2017).

**Hypothesis 3.** Perceived mentor organizational prototypicality moderates the indirect effect between formal mentoring support and AOC via OBSE (after controlling POS) such that the indirect effect will be stronger when perceived mentor organizational prototypicality is high.

## 3 | METHOD

### 3.1 | Sample and procedure

A multi-source time-lagged research design was used to collect data from participants of a formal mentoring program ( $n = 203$  mentor–newcomer dyads) in a large-scale privately owned manufacturing organization located in a large urban industrial park in Southern China.<sup>1</sup> The formal mentoring program is 1-year in duration and upon entry all newcomers are assigned to a formal mentor who is required to provide them with guidance and support to adjust to their new work roles and environment. The formal mentors are either the direct team leader or another senior member in the newcomers' department and each may be assigned to more than one newcomer–protégé depending on need. Most workers live on-site in a company provided dormitory. With the assistance of HR managers, newcomer–protégés enrolled in the program for a period of at least 3 months together with their corresponding formal mentors were randomly selected as

potential respondents. Respondents were blue-collar workers (i.e., junior-level shop-floor manufacturing operatives and their supervisors). Prior to administering the surveys, interviews were conducted with a sample of HR managers, formal mentors, and newcomer-protégés to ensure that it was well understood and refinements were made accordingly. Interviews provided additional contextual understanding about the variables being investigated, including that formal mentoring was central to the organization's newcomer socialization process and that newcomer-protégés viewed formal mentoring support as an important part of their socialization and organizational work life.

Following guidance from prior research (e.g., Chun et al., 2012; Weinberg & Lankau, 2010), data were collected from both newcomer-protégés and their formal mentors at different time intervals using separate questionnaires. Coding was used to ensure that newcomer-protégé and formal mentor responses could be matched. Each formal mentor was also provided with their newcomer-protégé's name(s) to ensure accuracy in rating. Respondents were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine HR practices and that their anonymity would be assured. Questionnaires were completed at work and returned by respondents in sealed envelopes to a designated location in the organization. During the first wave of data collection (Time 1), we asked newcomer-protégés to rate their OBSE and their formal mentor's organizational prototypicality. We then separately surveyed formal mentors on their perspectives toward formal mentoring support. Approximately 3 weeks following Time 1, at Time 2 we asked newcomer-protégés to rate their AOC. Prior studies (e.g., Neubert et al., 2008; Tsai et al., 2007) have used similar time intervals during data collection to create sufficient temporal separation and to help minimize common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

A total of 342 sets of questionnaires were distributed to the newcomer-protégés and their matched formal mentors at Time 1, which resulted in 246 completed questionnaires being returned by newcomer-protégés and 241 from their formal mentors, representing response rates of 72% and 70%, respectively. At Time 2, similar to the procedure at Time 1, the second set of questionnaires was administered to the newcomer-protégés who had returned completed questionnaires at Time 1. In total, 209 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 85%. After deleting some responses due to missing values for key variables, the final sample consisted of 203 matched pairs (i.e., 203 newcomer-protégés and their corresponding 114 formal mentors).

Of the newcomer-protégés, 69.5% were male and on average they were 25.8 years of age. A total of 123 newcomer-protégés (60.6%) had a secondary school or lower education level, 56 (27.6%) had a high school education, and 24 (11.8%) had a college or higher education. The average organizational tenure of the newcomer-protégés was 4.63 months. A total of 110 newcomer-protégés (54.2%) indicated that their formal mentors were their direct supervisors. Of the formal mentors, 66.7% were male. A total of 45 pairs (22.2%) of mentoring relationships were cross-gender matched, including 29 pairs that were male mentors supporting female protégés, and

16 pairs were female mentors supporting male protégés. To determine if respondent attrition created any detectable differences in our sample, we compared the respondents who only participated in the first wave with those who participated in both waves of the study. The results showed that there were no significant differences in demographic variables between these groups, such as age ( $t = -0.79$ , n.s.), gender ( $t = 0.34$ , n.s.), education level ( $t = 0.36$ , n.s.), and cross-gender matched ( $t = 0.86$ , n.s.). In addition, there were no significant differences in newcomer-protégés' perceptions of mentor organizational prototypicality between the female protégé-male mentor and male protégé-female mentor categories ( $t = -0.48$ , n.s.) or between same-gender and cross-gender relationships ( $t = -0.94$ , n.s.).

### 3.2 | Measures

All measures used in this study were from widely tested and validated sources. Unless otherwise stated, respondents answered questions on five-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." Because the data were collected in China and all measurement scales were originally written in English, we used commonly accepted back-translation procedures to ensure equivalence in meaning (Brislin, 1980; Klotz et al., 2023). In addition, to further promote equivalence in meaning and account for potential differences arising from contextual factors (e.g., cultural differences), we undertook additional procedural steps during the survey design and refinement stage, including using the services of professional translators, holding meetings to identify, discuss and adjust terminologies and meanings of scale items as appropriate, inviting feedback from HR managers on the questionnaires and appropriateness to the context, and pilot testing the surveys with a sample of newcomer-protégés and formal mentors.

*Formal mentoring support* was measured using Scandura and Ragins' (1993) 15-item scale, adapted from Scandura's (1992) Mentorship Scale. Sample items include "I take a personal interest in his/her career/job," "My protégé shares personal problems with me," and "My protégé respects my knowledge of the profession" ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ). Previous research has validated this scale's appropriateness for blue-collar workers (Cai et al., 2020) and the Chinese context (Chen et al., 2014).

*Organization-based self-esteem* (OBSE) was measured using Pierce et al.'s (1989) 10-item scale, a scale which has been previously used and validated in the Chinese context (e.g., Chen & Aryee, 2007; Wu et al., 2018). Sample items include "I am taken seriously around here," and "I am considered important around here" ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

*Perceived mentor organizational prototypicality* was measured using Van Knippenberg and Van Knippenberg's (2005) 5-item scale. Items were modified slightly to reflect the context of the study (i.e., newcomer-protégé perceptions about their formal mentor's organizational prototypicality). Sample items included "My mentor is a good example of the kind of people who are members of my organization" and "My mentor has very much in common with the members of my organization" ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

**TABLE 1** Results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the measures of the studied variables.

| Model   | $\chi^2$ | Df  | $\Delta\chi^2$ | CFI  | TLI  | RMSEA | SRMR  |
|---|----------|-----|----------------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Five-factor model   | 1809.56  | 979 |                | 0.90 | 0.90 | 0.065 | 0.074 |
| Four-factor model: combining OBSE and POS   | 2474.42  | 983 | 664.86**       | 0.82 | 0.81 | 0.087 | 0.084 |
| Four-factor model: combining OBSE and mentor organizational prototypicality                     | 2172.85  | 983 | 363.29**       | 0.86 | 0.85 | 0.077 | 0.083 |
| Four-factor model: combining OBSE and affective organizational commitment                       | 2789.75  | 983 | 980.19**       | 0.78 | 0.77 | 0.095 | 0.091 |
| Four-factor model: combining formal mentoring support and mentor organizational prototypicality | 2286.94  | 983 | 477.38**       | 0.84 | 0.84 | 0.081 | 0.096 |
| Four-factor model: combining formal mentoring and OBSE  | 2964.28  | 983 | 1154.72**      | 0.76 | 0.75 | 0.100 | 0.110 |

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; OBSE, stands for organization-based self-esteem; POS, stands for perceived organizational support; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index.

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

*Affective organizational commitment* (AOC) was measured using Allen and Meyer's (1990) 8-item scale. A sample item includes "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career working for this company" ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

Following the guidance of earlier work (e.g., Chun et al., 2012; Wanberg et al., 2003), we controlled for several potential confounding variables, including newcomer–protégés' age, gender, education level, and supervisory status. In addition, to gauge the incremental mediating effect of OBSE in the formal mentoring–AOC relationship, we simultaneously controlled for a well-established alternative mediator, POS, which was measured using Rhoades et al.'s (2001) 8-item scale. ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ).

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Confirmatory factor analysis

Several confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were performed to evaluate the discriminant validity of the measurement model. To assess model fit, we calculated the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), degree of freedom ( $df$ ), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Models have reasonable fit when CFI and TLI are greater than 0.90, RMSEA is lower than 0.08 and SRMR is lower than 0.10 (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Hair Jr et al., 1998; Hu & Bentler, 1999). As given in Table 1, the five-factor model has reasonable fit ( $\chi^2(979) = 1809.56$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; CFI = 0.90; TLI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.065; SRMR = 0.074), and all the respective factors loaded significantly to their latent constructs. In addition, we checked the discriminant validity by comparing the five-factor model against several alternative four-factor models in which any two constructs were randomly combined (see Table 1). As the changes of chi-square were significant, model comparison results revealed that the five-factor model was superior to all the alternative four-factor models, demonstrating the discriminant validity. Thus, all five constructs were included in further analysis.

### 4.2 | Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations of the variables used in the analysis. The correlations between the independent variable and the mediators, and between the mediators and dependent variables, were significant as expected. Formal mentoring support was positively correlated with OBSE ( $r = 0.14$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). AOC was positively correlated with OBSE ( $r = 0.27$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and POS ( $r = 0.27$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). In terms of control variables, newcomer–protégés' education level was positively related to OBSE ( $r = 0.15$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ).

### 4.3 | Hypotheses testing

In this study, the formal mentoring support provided to the 203 newcomer–protégés was rated by 114 formal mentors, suggesting nesting of data because a formal mentor may have rated the formal mentoring support of more than one newcomer–protégé. Accordingly, we followed guidance from prior research (e.g., Owens et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2012) to calculate the design effect (Kish, 1965; Maas & Hox, 2005; design effect =  $1 + [(average\ group\ size - 1) \times ICC1]$ ) for formal mentoring support, resulting in a value of 1.49 which is below the conventional cutoff point of 2 (Kaiser et al., 2006; Maas & Hox, 2005). This suggests that formal mentors' rating of formal mentoring support is relatively independent (i.e., the results were not influenced significantly). We therefore tested the hypotheses at the individual level in our further analysis.

PROCESS macro version 3.5 was used to test all hypotheses, because it enables testing of the indirect effect and the conditional indirect effect in conjunction with bootstrapping procedures for multiple mediators (Hayes, 2018). Specifically, Hypothesis 1 was tested by Model 4 of PROCESS macro with 95% confidence intervals and 5000 resamples. We examined the indirect effect of formal mentoring support on AOC through OBSE, controlling for the indirect effect of POS. As given in Table 3, the indirect effect of OBSE was significant (effect = 0.03,



**TABLE 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

|  | Mean  | SD   | 1     | 2      | 3     | 4     | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8      |
|--|-------|------|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. Age                                   | 25.82 | 7.57 |       |        |       |       |        |        |        |        |
| 2. Gender                                | 1.31  | 0.46 | 0.03  |        |       |       |        |        |        |        |
| 3. Education level                       | 2.46  | 0.80 | -0.08 | -0.18* |       |       |        |        |        |        |
| 4. Supervisory status                    | 0.54  | 0.50 | 0.03  | -0.12  | -0.06 |       |        |        |        |        |
| 5. Formal mentoring support              | 3.78  | 0.46 | -0.03 | -0.02  | -0.05 | -0.06 |        |        |        |        |
| 6. OBSE                                  | 3.61  | 0.47 | 0.13  | -0.02  | 0.15* | 0.02  | 0.14*  |        |        |        |
| 7. POS                                   | 3.15  | 0.52 | 0.18* | 0.00   | -0.09 | 0.10  | 0.17*  | 0.22** |        |        |
| 8. Mentor organizational prototypicality | 3.52  | 0.59 | 0.06  | 0.08   | -0.06 | -0.10 | 0.08   | 0.26** | 0.30** |        |
| 9. Affective organizational commitment   | 3.36  | 0.53 | 0.18* | -0.17* | 0.13  | 0.00  | 0.22** | 0.27** | 0.27** | 0.20** |

Note:  $N = 203$ . Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female. Education was coded as 1 = primary school; 2 = secondary school; 3 = high school; 4 = college or university; 5 = master degree or higher. Age was coded as the number of years old. Supervisory status was coded as 0 = supervisor not as a mentor and 1 = supervisor as a mentor.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**TABLE 3** PROCESS macro results for Hypothesis 1.

| Outcome variable: OBSE   |        |        |                     |                |
|--|--------|--------|---------------------|----------------|
|  | B      | SE     | t                   | R <sup>2</sup> |
| Constant   | 2.54   | 0.34   | 7.44***             | 0.06           |
| Age  | 0.01   | 0.00   | 2.04*               |                |
| Gender   | 0.01   | 0.07   | 0.19                |                |
| Education level  | 0.10   | 0.04   | 2.39*               |                |
| Supervisory status   | -0.01  | 0.07   | -0.22               |                |
| Formal mentoring support   | 0.15   | 0.07   | 2.16*               |                |
| Outcome variable: Affective organizational commitment                              |        |        |                     |                |
|  | B      | SE     | t                   | R <sup>2</sup> |
| Constant   | 1.07   | 0.43   | 2.51*               | 0.20           |
| Age  | 0.01   | 0.00   | 2.14*               |                |
| Gender   | -0.18  | 0.08   | -2.31*              |                |
| Education level  | 0.08   | 0.04   | 1.72                |                |
| Supervisory status   | 0.04   | 0.07   | 0.64                |                |
| Formal mentoring support   | 0.19   | 0.08   | 2.47*               |                |
| OBSE   | 0.19   | 0.08   | 2.50*               |                |
| POS  | 0.21   | 0.07   | 2.91**              |                |
| Indirect effect of formal mentoring support on affective organizational commitment |        |        |                     |                |
|  | Effect | BootSE | Confidence interval |                |
| Total  | 0.07   | 0.03   | 0.02, 0.14          |                |
| OBSE   | 0.03   | 0.02   | 0.002, 0.07         |                |
| POS  | 0.04   | 0.02   | 0.004, 0.10         |                |

Note: 95% level of confidence for confidence intervals. Bootstrapping by 5000 re-samples. Unstandardized coefficients are presented.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

SE = 0.02, Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals = 0.002, 0.07), supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 was tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 1) where OBSE was regressed on formal mentoring support, perceived

mentor organizational prototypicality and their interaction. The variables used to create the interaction term were mean-centered, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991). As given in Table 4, the interaction term (coefficient = 0.30, SE = 0.13,  $p < 0.05$ ) was positively related to OBSE. Next, we plotted the interaction effects using the procedure developed by Aiken and West (1991). As Figure 2 depicts, formal mentoring support was positively related to newcomer-protégés' OBSE when mentor organizational prototypicality was high (+1 SD, effect = 0.27, SE = 0.09,  $p < 0.01$ ), and the relationship was not significant when mentor organizational prototypicality was low (-1 SD, effect = -0.07, SE = 0.11,  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

We further tested Hypothesis 3 by Model 7 of the PROCESS macro with 5000 resamples. As given in Table 4, the indirect effect between formal mentoring support and AOC through OBSE was significant (effect = 0.05, SE = 0.03, Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals = 0.01, 0.11) when mentor organizational prototypicality was high (+1 SD), and not significant (effect = -0.01, SE = 0.02, Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals = -0.07, 0.03) when mentor organizational prototypicality was low (-1 SD, at the 95% confidence intervals). In addition, the index of moderated mediation confirms that the difference between these two indirect effects was significant (Index = 0.06, SE = 0.04, Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals: 0.002, 0.15), supporting Hypothesis 3.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Overall, the results provide empirical support for our theoretical predictions. We found that newcomer-protégés' OBSE mediated the effects of formal mentoring support on their AOC, even in the presence of POS. Moreover, we further found that formal mentor organizational prototypicality as perceived by newcomer-protégés moderated the effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer-protégé OBSE, such that when perceived formal mentor

**TABLE 4** PROCESS macro results for Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3.

| Outcome variable: OBSE  |        |        |                     |                |
|---|--------|--------|---------------------|----------------|
|   | B      | SE     | t                   | R <sup>2</sup> |
| Constant  | 3.18   | 0.19   | 16.98***            | 0.15           |
| Age   | 0.01   | 0.00   | 1.64                |                |
| Gender  | -0.03  | 0.07   | -0.41               |                |
| Education level   | 0.12   | 0.04   | 3.00**              |                |
| Supervisory status  | -0.03  | 0.06   | 0.39                |                |
| Formal mentoring support  | 0.10   | 0.07   | 1.43                |                |
| Mentor organizational prototypicality   | 0.23   | 0.05   | 4.24***             |                |
| Formal mentoring support X mentor organizational prototypicality  | 0.30   | 0.13   | 2.33*               |                |
| Conditional effects of formal mentoring support on OBSE at high/low level of mentor organizational prototypicality  |        |        |                     |                |
| Mentor organizational prototypicality   | B      | SE     | t                   |                |
| Low (-1 SD)   | -0.07  | 0.11   | -0.66               |                |
| High (+1 SD)  | 0.27   | 0.09   | 3.00**              |                |
| Conditional indirect effects of formal mentoring support on affective organizational commitment via OBSE at high/low level of mentor organizational prototypicality                       |        |        |                     |                |
| Mentor organizational prototypicality   | Effect | BootSE | Confidence interval |                |
| Low (-1 SD)   | -0.01  | 0.02   | -0.07, 0.03         |                |
| High (+1 SD)  | 0.05   | 0.03   | 0.01, 0.11          |                |
| Index of moderated mediation  | 0.06   | 0.04   | 0.002, 0.15         |                |
| Conditional indirect effects of formal mentoring support on affective organizational commitment via POS (controlled mechanism) at high/low level of mentor organizational prototypicality |        |        |                     |                |
| Mentor organizational prototypicality   | Effect | BootSE | Confidence interval |                |
| Low (-1 SD)   | 0.03   | 0.03   | -0.02, 0.09         |                |
| High (+1 SD)  | 0.04   | 0.03   | 0.002, 0.10         |                |
| Index of moderated mediation  | 0.01   | 0.03   | -0.04, 0.09         |                |

Note: 95% level of confidence for confidence intervals. Bootstrapping by 5000 re-samples. Unstandardized coefficients are presented.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

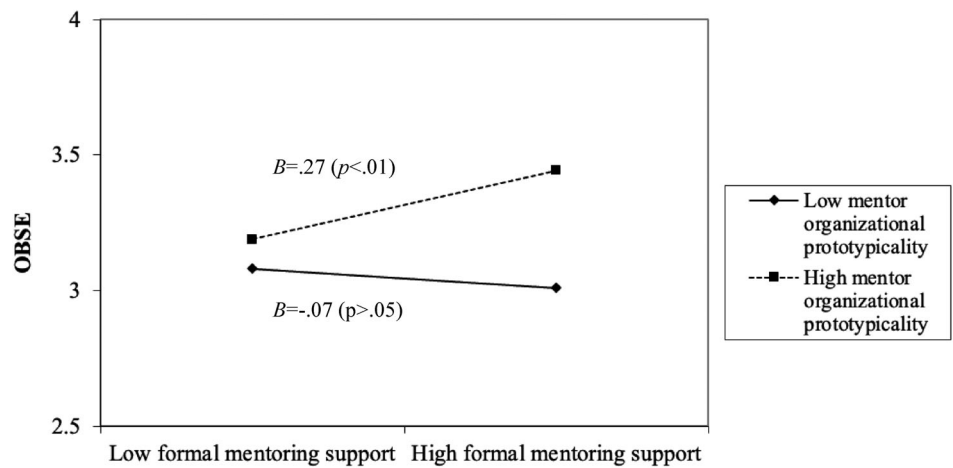
organizational prototypicality is high (low), the influence of formal mentoring support on OBSE is stronger (weaker).

## 5.1 | Theoretical implications

The study contributes to theory in several ways. First, by introducing and testing a self-concept-based perspective (Korman, 1970; Shamir et al., 1993) for the effects of formal mentoring support, we offer an alternative theoretical explanation to relational and reciprocity logic which are widely applied in the mentoring literature. Specifically, lending support to our theoretical predictions, we empirically demonstrate that newcomer-protégés' OBSE serves as a stronger channel for promoting AOC via formal mentoring support than POS. According to self-evaluation and self-consistency logic, because individuals form perceptions of their self-worth and value in an organization based on their experiences at work and because they strive to act and behave

in a manner consistent with these self-perceptions, by making newcomer-protégés feel good about themselves and valued by the organization, formal mentoring support can enhance their OBSE, thereby engendering positive attitudes toward the organization. Such findings are consistent with suggestions in the literature that mentoring is associated with protégés' positive self-image (Ragins et al., 2000) and AOC (Chen et al., 2014; Chun et al., 2012), research that we build on and extend by delineating why and how such relationships are likely to exist in the first instance. Moreover, although prior studies (Ghosh et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2019) have examined OBSE, their focus is on the effects of mentoring relationship quality and reciprocal mentoring benefits. Hence, we build on and extend these studies by examining the implications of OBSE in relation to formal mentoring support during socialization, an approach that also responds to calls (e.g., Allen et al., 2017) for examining mentoring in the socialization context. Although socialization scholars (e.g., Chao et al., 1994) have long argued that the process of socializing

**FIGURE 2** The moderation effect of mentor organizational prototypicality.



newcomers is facilitated through interactions with significant others (e.g., mentors) in the workplace (Ashforth et al., 2007; Slaughter & Zickar, 2006), prior research has mainly emphasized group-based organizational socialization tactics, such as orientation workshops (Allen et al., 2017; Batistič, 2018). We shift attention to an individual-based mentor–protégé socialization tactic and advance understanding of how its effects can be channeled to cultivate newcomer–protégés self-perceptions at work, a focus that is vital given that early newcomer experiences are often laden with anxiety and uncertainty (Ellis et al., 2015). Thus, by linking formal mentoring support to newcomer–protégé OBSE, we advance understanding of how newcomer–protégés' self-worth at work can be established by their socialization experiences derived from formal mentoring.

Second, we provide an account of when or under what circumstances the effects of formal mentoring support may be strengthened or weakened. Although the important role that mentors play in the newcomer socialization process is acknowledged (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007), little is known about the implications of individual-level mentor differences, particularly the degree to which a mentor who represents an organization's shared goals and values influences the effects of formal mentoring support. Understanding the influence of mentor organizational prototypicality as perceived by newcomer–protégés is important because how we view significant others in the workplace is salient to how we interpret meaning from and react to our work environment (Ashforth et al., 2007). Being key agents of mentoring, formal mentors who are perceived as exemplary representatives of the organization are important to shaping newcomer–protégés' perceptions of their organization. As studies have shown (e.g., Sluss et al., 2012; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008), employees' affect and cognition can be 'generalized' from one domain (e.g., significant others) to another (e.g., organization). However, whether perceptions can be generalized from significant others (e.g., formal mentors) to the organization depends on the extent to which the significant others stand for and represent the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2010). Further, as scholars have asserted (e.g., Pierce & Gardner, 2004), the cues and messages from significant others (e.g., formal mentors) constitute an important source of OBSE, suggesting that when

newcomer–protégés perceive that their formal mentors stand for and promote the organization's shared values and goals, they are likely to develop and reinforce a more durable self at work. By contrast, if a mentor's organizational prototypicality is perceived as being low, such inconsistent cues may affect their consistency and credibility and thus the effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer–protégés' perceptions and OBSE. Doing so also responds to calls from scholars (Hu et al., 2014, p. 34) to investigate the implications associated with mentors' "shared identity with the organization."

Third, by examining formal mentoring support in the context of blue-collar newcomer–protégés, we also offer novel insights into an important but often over-looked constituent of the labor force, new contextual understanding that builds on and extends an extant body of work which is primarily devoted to the white-collar job context (e.g., Kao et al., 2014; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017; Singh et al., 2009). Such theoretical elaboration is important because although our results indicate that both OBSE and POS significantly mediated the effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer–protégé AOC, formal mentor organizational prototypicality moderated the mediating effect of OBSE (index of moderated mediation = 0.002, 0.15, excluding zero, Table 4) but not the mediating effect of POS (index of moderated mediation = -0.04, 0.09, including zero, Table 4). Interestingly, as these results imply, social exchange logic typically used to explain the effects of mentoring on AOC may be less affected by mentor organizational prototypicality in the case of blue-collar workers than it is for white-collar workers (Eisenberger et al., 2010). One possible reason for this finding may be that POS is a more relevant underlying mediating mechanism in occupations in which the job tasks are more complex or involve greater autonomy (e.g., white-collar work; Pelfrene et al., 2001), especially when a prototypical formal mentor's potential to develop skills and capabilities essential to performing complex and ambiguous work tasks is considered. By contrast, in occupations in which the work is more routine and repetitive (e.g., shop-floor manufacturing operatives; Halle, 1984) and offers less autonomy (Toppinen-Tanner et al., 2002), formal mentoring's influence on newcomer–protégés self-worth and value to the organization is likely to be more salient, making OBSE the more

prominent mechanism through which the effects of mentoring support by a prototypical formal mentor are transmitted to influence blue-collar newcomer-protégés' OBSE, and in turn, their work attitudes. Because prior work on the role of organizational prototypicality draws mainly on the social exchange perspective in the white-collar context (e.g. Eisenberger et al., 2010; Eisenberger et al., 2014; Shoss et al., 2013), the conceptualization we introduce provides an alternative explanation to such logic and suggests that the effects of formal mentoring support provided by a prototypical formal mentor are likely to be channeled differently depending on the newcomer-protégé's job task characteristics or occupation (e.g., Bozionelos & Wang, 2006; Huang, 2011). Such findings also extend meta-analysis (e.g., Eby et al., 2013) and work by Haggard et al. (2011) by offering a possible reason why formal mentoring's effectiveness may vary across different occupations.

Finally, the study also adds to the newcomer socialization literature in the Chinese context, and specifically Chinese organizations. As cross-cultural research suggests, socialization cues and information received from a prototypical mentor are likely to be especially salient in the Chinese context, which is governed by traditional Chinese values, such as paternalism (Chen & Farh, 2010; Zhou et al., 2019) and high power distance (Hofstede, 2001) and exemplified by guanxi and dependency-based (superior-subordinate) employment relationships. Thus, under these conditions, we can expect that a prototypical formal mentor may have an amplifying influence on the effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer-protégé OBSE during their on-boarding. Such considerations warrant further research and underscore the importance of testing our theoretical elaborations and the study's generalizability in other cultural contexts.

## 5.2 | Practical implications

Our findings also offer important insights of relevance to HR managers involved in the design and implementation of mentoring and socialization strategies. First, by providing a more precise understanding of how formal mentoring support's effects are transmitted through newcomer-protégés' OBSE to influence their AOC, we alert HR managers to the idea that steps should be taken to bolster formal mentors' ability to promote newcomer-protégé OBSE. We suggest that in addition to providing formal mentors with training about *what* types of guidance (i.e., information, knowledge) they should offer to newcomer-protégés, formal mentors should also receive training about *how* to deliver their mentoring because the manner in which organizational members interact is known to influence individuals' self-esteem at work (Chen & Aryee, 2007). For example, formal mentors could be provided with communication skills training which encourages the use of praise, respect, and positive feedback given that such forms of communication have been shown to promote feelings of self-worth and value, thereby increasing newcomer-protégés' OBSE and the resultant AOC. An added benefit of such training is that it is also likely to improve the quality of interpersonal relationships in general. Other targeted HR strategies and interventions could include

open recognition programs and rewards for newcomer-protégés (e.g., company-wide announcements, awards, gift cards) when they achieve certain milestones during their socialization because these types of incentives have been shown to cultivate OBSE. Such initiatives may also be beneficial to the organization more broadly because higher levels of employee OBSE are associated with other positive outcomes, including increased employee proactivity (Wu et al., 2019), citizenship behavior (Bowling et al., 2010), and the ability to cope with different forms of workplace mistreatment (Wu et al., 2018).

Second, our study also informs HR managers of the potential benefits associated with formal mentors who demonstrate organizational prototypicality. As we find, when formal mentors are viewed to share the collective goals, values, and beliefs of the organization, this can amplify the positive effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer-protégés OBSE and in turn AOC. We therefore encourage HR managers to ensure that the formal mentors they assign to newcomer-protégés are representative agents of the organization. To accomplish this, HR strategies could include selecting and assigning formal mentors that demonstrate the goals, values, and beliefs of the organization. They could also include providing training to formal mentors (e.g., using workshops, company portals and bulletins with relevant content) about goals and values desired by the organization as well as how to communicate them effectively when interacting with newcomer-protégés (Eisenberger et al., 2010). Formal mentors could even be offered incentives for displaying organizational prototypicality (e.g., rewards and recognition, Chiang & Birtch, 2012).

Finally, the study further alerts HR professionals to the importance of context in designing and implementing mentoring strategies for newcomers. As our findings suggest, instead of treating formal mentoring and newcomer socialization as separate tactics, HR managers should consider them as being interdependent such that they can be leveraged to create synergistic effects during the socialization of new employees. As we further point out, HR managers also need to be cognizant of the implications associated with characteristics of the job and backgrounds of the mentoring recipients. As prior work has shown, blue-collar workers often lack self-worth and value and as a result may be less committed to their employing organizations (Froese & Xiao, 2012). Whereas previous investigations in the white-collar context suggest that the effects of mentoring are likely to be transmitted through POS, our study reveals that in the blue-collar worker context, interventions that target the development and strengthening of newcomer-protégés OBSE may be more beneficial, especially during socialization when such workers are likely to be experiencing higher levels of anxiety and uncertainty that can adversely impact self-perceptions. At the same time, the study also provides insights relevant to formal versus informal mentoring. While we do not dispute the benefits of informal mentoring in general, we do recommend that HR managers consider implementing a formal mentoring program for the socialization of blue-collar newcomer-protégés because it appears to yield benefits above and beyond informal mentoring. The above findings are likely to be particularly relevant to HR managers involved in the oversight of large blue-collar workforces (e.g., manufacturers), especially those seeking more context-specific

guidance to help reduce the typically high levels of employee turnover that their organizations experience (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017; Li & Lu, 2014).

### 5.3 | Strengths, limitations, and future research directions

The study has a number of strengths, including its time-lagged multi-source design, the inclusion of an alternative mediator to assess the incremental effect of OBSE, and its focus on often overlooked but significant contexts in the mentoring and socialization literatures. Despite its strengths, certain limitations warrant consideration. First, although the time-lagged design helps to minimize potential bias, future research could consider longitudinal designs with a greater number of observations over a longer period of time, for example, to examine how the effects of formal mentoring support on OBSE and AOC might change over time during organizational socialization (Gardner et al., 2022). Second, given that not all mentoring relationships are likely to be effective (Allen et al., 2006a, 2006b), future research could examine the implications of negative mentoring experiences (Eby et al., 2004) on newcomer protégé's OBSE and AOC. Third, it would be an interesting avenue for future research to include newcomer-protégé organizational prototypicality as an additional outcome variable. As prior research suggests (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2010; Eisenberger et al., 2014), favorable treatment from a high-quality relationship with the supervisor may lead newcomer-protégés to emulate the supervisors characteristics (e.g., organizational prototypicality). In a similar vein, studies could also consider exploring other formal mentoring outcomes, such as newcomer-protégés' willingness to become formal mentors. Fourth, we also recommend that additional mediators such as self-efficacy, psychological safety, and psychological contract (Blaique et al., 2023; Haggard, 2012; Lankau et al., 2006) be included in future investigations because such mechanisms may also influence newcomer-protégé attitudes, especially during socialization. Lastly, the results of this study should also be interpreted in light of the blue-collar manufacturing and Chinese contexts. For example, to enhance the generalizability of our conceptualization, future work could test its predictions in other settings, such as the service sector in which jobs are often considered less routine and more complex in nature than blue-collar work. Similarly, given that the high power distance orientation and paternalistic culture of China may influence how employees view senior organizational members and authority figures (e.g., formal mentors; Zheng et al., 2019), future research should also replicate the study in different country contexts.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Effectively integrating and retaining newcomer-protégés, a primary aim of an organizational tactic such as formal mentoring, is critical to the long-term competitiveness and survival of organizations (Ellis et al., 2015; Ou et al., 2018). Building on self-concept-based theory

and integrating work on organizational prototypicality, we provide a more nuanced theoretical elaboration of why and when formal mentoring influences newcomer-protégés' AOC. By unpacking the implications of the self-concept-based mechanism underlying the effects of formal mentoring support, the study not only offers an alternative explanation to the social exchange and relational perspectives (Young & Perrewé, 2000) but it suggests that newcomer-protégés' OBSE plays an important mediating role in channeling the effects of formal mentoring support on their AOC. Our further inclusion of formal mentor organizational prototypicality as perceived by newcomer-protégés also provides an account of when or under what circumstances the effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer-protégés' OBSE may be attenuated or exacerbated. In addition to offering promising directions for future research, the study also provides HR managers with important leverage points and insights into how they might enhance the design, implementation, and effectiveness of their formal mentoring strategies, findings that should be especially relevant to the newcomer socialization and blue-collar work contexts.

### FUNDING INFORMATION

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Data were collected as part of a larger project with one variable (i.e., "formal mentoring support") being included in another publication.

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**How to cite this article:** Birtch, T. A., Cai, Z., & Chiang, F. F. T. (2023). Effects of formal mentoring support on newcomer-protégé affective organizational commitment: a self-concept-based perspective. *Human Resource Management*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22198>