

The role of mentoring in promoting organizational commitment among black managers: An evaluation of the indirect effects of racial similarity and shared racial perspectives

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Received 8 June 2006; accepted 8 August 2007

Abstract

Due to the effort and expense of recruiting black managers, there is a need to maximize the chances of retaining those that are most productive. Effective mentoring may be one avenue to reach this objective by enhancing job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Using the responses of 139 members of the National Black MBA Association (MBMBAA), this study explored the indirect or mediated effects of demographic (i.e. white mentors–black protégés vs. black mentors–black protégés) and attitudinal (i.e. perceived complementary racial perspectives) similarity on the affective commitment of black managers. The results suggest that attitudinal similarity is a more critical factor than demographic similarity in enhancing mentoring-driven affective commitment among black managers. In addition, the results reveal that in certain circumstances demographic similarity can actually have an adverse impact on the career benefits realized from mentoring relationships.

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Keywords: Employee turnover; Job satisfaction; Mentoring; Organizational commitment; Race

1. Introduction

In a qualitative study of cross-race dyads, [Thomas \(1993\)](#) found that when colleagues in cross-race mentoring relationships shared complementary racial perspectives (i.e. common attitudes about race and race-related issues), their relationships tended to evolve into rewarding, mentor–protégé relationships. In contrast, when partners in cross-race mentoring relationships shared non-complementary racial perspectives, their relationships seemed to achieve suboptimal, “sponsor–protégé” relationships. This notion of shared racial perspectives seems vital in the determination of effective cross-race mentoring relationships and is the primary focus of the research reported herein.

Generally, the functions of a mentor are considered career (instrumental) and psychosocial ([Burke, 1984](#); [Kram, 1985](#)).

Career functions include sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and providing challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. According to [Thomas \(1993\)](#), mentors provide both career and psychosocial guidance, whereas sponsors provide only career guidance. This study assesses the relative influence of perceived complementary racial perspective (PCRP) and racial (i.e. demographic) similarity on mentoring functions and the ultimate outcomes of mentoring relationships involving minority protégés.

Given the effort and expense of recruiting minority managers, retention is a key concern for many organizations (e.g., [Jackson and Alleyne, 2005](#)). Job satisfaction ([Futrell and Parasuraman 1984](#); [Sager et al., 1988](#)) and affective commitment ([Chandrasekaran et al., 2000](#); [McNeilly and Russ 1992](#)) are important outcomes from the point of view of retaining black managers. With this in mind, this study examines the extent to which PCRP and racial similarity influence black protégés' 1) perceptions of his/her mentor's behaviors and 2) job satisfaction and attitudinal

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commitment. It attempts to capture the perceptions of black protégés involved in same-race and cross-race relationships in order to address questions related to how firms might best develop and ultimately retain their minority hires through mentoring programs.

2. Cross-race mentoring relationships

Diversified mentoring relationships are composed of mentors and protégés who differ on one or more group memberships associated with power in an organization (Ragins, 1997). Recognizing that models based on white male samples may not generalize to these groups, several studies have attempted to understand how cross-gender diversified mentoring relationships might differ (e.g., Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a; Ragins, 1989). Although some studies have focused on race and cross-race relationships (e.g., Gonzalez-Figueroa and Young, 2005; Thomas, 1990, 1993), in general, the number of studies is limited (Cianni and Romberger, 1995). Furthermore, despite evidence that suggests that same-race relationships have a positive impact on a relationship's success, the evidence is inconclusive (Davidson and Foster-Johnson, 2001).

Thomas (1990) conducted a study that consisted of data from 88 black and 107 white managers. One of his key research questions was: "In what ways do same-race and cross-race relationships differ (p. 481)?" A key hypothesis was that protégés in same-race relationships would receive more psychosocial support than those in cross-race relationships. The results revealed that same-race relationships indeed provide more psychosocial support than cross-race relationships for both blacks and whites, though the level of career support provided did not differ. Thomas suggested that the relatively limited psychosocial support that blacks receive in cross-race developmental relationships is due to the impact of racial dynamics being most tangible after the relationship moves beyond an initial career focus.

Thomas (1993) again explored racial dynamics in cross-race developmental relationships. He conducted a field study of 22 cross-race (black and white) work relationships to determine how various approaches to handling racial differences might lead to differing levels of the relationship. His findings suggest that when colleagues in cross-race developmental relationships share a complementary racial perspective their relationship tends to evolve into a mentor–protégé relationship. In contrast, when colleagues in cross-race developmental relationships differ in their perspective on race, the relationship seems incapable of reaching its full potential.

Ensher et al. (2002) examined how perceived attitudinal similarity, in terms of general outlook, values, and problem-solving approach, and demographic similarity (i.e., cross-race versus same-race and cross-gender versus same-gender) affected protégés' support and satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. Recognizing that both demographic similarity and perceived attitudinal similarity constitute an overall evaluation of perceived degree of similarity, they attempted to determine the relative importance of each aspect on outcomes of the relationship. They found that perceived attitudinal similarity was indeed a better predictor of protégés' satisfaction with and support from mentors

than was demographic similarity. Importantly, their sample may not generalize to corporate settings; in addition to the limited number of black respondents, it did not include corporate managers.

3. A model of the relative impact of perceived racial perspective and racial congruence

3.1. Conceptual model

Based on Thomas' (1993) and Ensher et al.'s (2002) findings, the proposed model suggests that PCRPs and racial similarity will both be positively related to psychosocial interaction, with the former having a greater relative impact on psychosocial interaction than the latter. Consistent with social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1985) and similarity-attraction (Byrne, 1971; Lincoln and Miller, 1979) theories, as well as empirical support for the effects of demographic and perceived attitudinal similarity on mentoring behavior, the model highlights that ongoing interaction between mentors and protégés is likely to be most effective when both parties share similar racial viewpoints.

H1a. PCRPs are positively related to psychosocial interaction.

H1b. Racial similarity is positively related to psychosocial interaction.

H1c. PCRPs have a relatively greater effect on psychosocial interaction than demographic similarity (i.e., a same race dyad).

The model suggests that psychosocial interaction is a central construct that represents the conduit through which overall perceived degree of similarity influences the protégé's perception of his/her mentor's career behaviors, as well as his/her desire to imitate his/her mentor. A protégé will model his/her mentor's behavior and perceive career guidance after he/she senses or directly experiences a genuine comfort level with this individual. This might include a sense of mutual respect or some common mind-set beyond the technical aspects of the job. Because psychosocial interactions with a mentor are likely to expose the protégé to unique insights, habits, and even unannounced opportunities, they likely serve as a causal precedent to career benefits. Furthermore, we expect that such encounters are likely to result in role-modeling behaviors which, ultimately, are likely to engender career benefits.

H2a. Psychosocial interaction is positively related to role-modeling benefits.

H2b. Psychosocial interaction is positively related to career benefits.

H3. Role-modeling behavior is positively related to career benefits.

Allen et al. (2004) demonstrated a robust relationship between mentoring and job satisfaction and suggest that the most consistent benefits of mentoring are on affective reactions to the workplace. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are well-established constructs in organizational research and turnover literature in particular (Brashear et al., 2006;

Chandrasekaran et al., 2000; Futrell and Parasuraman 1984; McNeilly and Russ 1992).

Mentoring literature indicates that effective mentoring relationships promote a protégé's organizational commitment (McManus and Russell, 1997). Moreover, Colarelli and Bishop (1990) found that career and psychosocial mentoring functions were positively related to organizational commitment. Brashear et al. (2006) found significant support for the relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment. We consider affective commitment because a preponderance of managerial (i.e., salesforce turnover) literature focuses on this dimension of commitment (Chandrasekaran et al., 2000; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). More importantly, scholars note the link between affective commitment and turnover intention (Chandrasekaran et al., 2000; McNeilly and Russ, 1992). Thus, the model reinforces the positive relationship established between the career benefits of mentoring, job satisfaction, and affective commitment.

3.2. Control variables

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory suggests that leaders are likely to treat some subordinates as in-group members and others as out-group members. The resulting exchange has an influence on organizational outcomes, including job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Ensher et al., 2002; Liden et al., 1993). Thus, supervisor–subordinate types of mentoring relationships are expected to influence potential mentoring outcomes (Dansky, 1996; Glomb and Welsh, 2005; Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989). We account for the effects of these types of relationships on career benefits by including a supervisor–subordinate control variable. We also consider the potential effects of gender on psychosocial interaction. Our intent in controlling for gender is to ensure that the association between the race-related variables and psychosocial interaction is not enhanced or obscured by a potential match or mismatch due to gender dynamics (e.g. male protégé and male mentor vs. female protégé and male mentor).

4. Method

We surveyed approximately 800 members of a chapter of the National Black MBA Association (NBMBAA) located in a large southeastern city to study the nature and effectiveness of white mentor–black protégé, cross-race mentoring relationships from the protégé's standpoint and to test the proposed conceptual model. The NBMBAA membership is an appropriate sampling frame because: (1) unlike other empirical, cross-race studies that surveyed one or two organizations (e.g., Ensher et al., 2002; Thomas, 1990), the NBMBAA pool is a multi-firm, multi-industry, multifunctional group, and (2) it captures the perspectives of black managerial employees who are likely to have experienced cross-race developmental relationships in corporate settings.

Consistent with established definitions of mentoring/developmental relationships (e.g., Chao, 1997; Ragins, 1989; Thomas, 1990), we defined mentoring relationship as follows: "A career-oriented relationship between a more senior employee, manager, or person and yourself that was initiated to help you develop a

better understanding of your roles, the social/political nature of your work environment, and to advance your career." Only members who had particularly effective mentors were asked to complete the full survey, which included questions about their mentor's background, and measures of perceived racial perspectives and mentor functions. Two hundred and four members participated in the study, for an effective response rate of 25%.

Of the 204 respondents who participated in the study, 60 (29%) indicated that they had not had a particularly effective mentor. Five respondents indicated their race was either white or multi-cultural. Given the focus of our study, these respondents were excluded from the sample for model testing purposes. The exclusion of these participants resulted in an effective sample of 139 protégés that were capable of offering detailed information about their relationship with an on-the-job mentor.

About 40% of the protégés in the sample reported having a cross-race mentor and an equal percentage also reported having a cross-gender mentor. Furthermore, 49% of those who reported having a cross-race mentor also reported having a cross-gender mentor (i.e. about 19% of the sample had a cross-race, cross-gender mentor). About 50% of the black mentors were female compared to 34% of the white mentors.

4.1. Variables included in the analysis

4.1.1. Perceived complementary racial perspectives (PCRP)

We developed our measure of perceived complementary racial perspectives using Thomas' (1993) qualitative work as a theoretical foundation. A list of the measurement items for all constructs can be found in the Appendix.

4.1.2. Racial similarity

We computed a dummy variable that indicated the extent to which the mentoring dyad was either homogeneous or heterogeneous in terms of race. Protégés who participated in same-race mentoring relationships were coded as 1, and those in cross-race relationships were coded as 0.

4.1.3. Mentor functions

We used Noe's (1988b) instrument to measure protégés' perceptions of their mentor's career-oriented and role-modeling behaviors, and psychosocial interaction. Career behaviors represent mentoring functions such as protection, exposure and visibility, and sponsorship. Psychosocial benefits assess the extent to which the mentor provided coaching, counseling, acceptance, and confirmation. Role modeling is related to imitating the work behavior of the mentor. To simplify this scale and therefore encourage completion, we reduced Noe's original 29-item scale to a 16-item scale that reliably captured the essence of a mentor's multiple functions. Of the items, 5 addressed the career benefits construct, 8 addressed the psychosocial interaction construct, and 3 addressed the role-modeling construct.

4.1.4. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction represents an overall global state of satisfaction regarding one's job. It is based on measures that Brown and Peterson (1994) developed and comprised four items.

Table 1
Measurement properties

Construct	Scale	Mean	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Role modeling	FOR	3.92	.71	–	–	.08	.07	.03	.02	.02	.00	.01	.04
2. Psychosocial benefits	FOR	4.03	.59	–	.29	–	.17	.00	.00	.12	.01	.01	.06
3. Career benefits	FOR	3.67	.82	–	.27	.41	–	.02	.02	.00	.06	.18	.02
4. Job satisfaction	REF	3.59	.97	56%	.17	.00	.15	.79	.43	.01	.00	.01	.04
5. Affective commitment	REF	3.03	1.11	71%	.14	–.01	.14	.66	.90	.02	.01	.00	.03
6. Shared racial perspective	REF	3.71	.78	60%	.14	.34	.05	.10	.14	.82	.20	.00	.05
7. Racial congruence	DY	–	–	–	–.01	.09	–.24	.05	.08	.45	–	.00	.04
8. Supervising mentor	DY	–	–	–	.09	.11	.42	.12	–.01	–.04	–.06	–	.02
9. Relationship duration	ORD	–	–	–	.20	.24	.15	.19	.16	.22	.21	.14	–

Notes: FOR=Formative construct; REF=Reflective construct; DY=Dummy variable; ORD=Categorical variable. Entries below the diagonal of the correlation matrix are construct correlations. Entries above the diagonal represent shared variance between the constructs. Composite reliabilities are shown in bold on the correlation matrix diagonal. Polyserial correlations are presented for the association between the categorical variable and the formative, reflective, and dummy variables. Correlations greater than or equal to .14 are statistically significant ($p < .10$).

4.1.5. Affective commitment

Affective or attitudinal commitment refers to an individual's identification with an organization and his/her commitment to maintaining membership to pursue the organization's goals (McGee and Ford, 1987). Brashear et al. (2006) adapted McGee and Ford's (1987) scale to measure the relationship between affective commitment and turnover intention. We applied Brashear et al.'s (2006) scale.

4.1.6. Supervisor–subordinate mentor type

We used a dummy variable that indicated whether respondents reported to their mentors to measure the type of relationship. Responses were coded as 1 if the protégé indicated that he or she reported to the mentor and 0 if otherwise.

4.1.7. Mentor–protégé gender match

We used a dummy variable to control for the potential effects of gender on the hypothesized relationships. A gender match between the protégé and the mentor was coded as 1 while a cross-gender relationship was coded as a 0.

4.2. Measurement validation procedures

4.2.1. Reflective measures

We initially used 13 items (see the Appendix) to measure the 3 reflective constructs employed in the proposed conceptual model (PCRP, job satisfaction, and affective commitment). As a first step toward measure validation, we examined item-to-total correlations for all the items in each scale. If deleting an item from a scale did not compromise the construct's face validity, we deleted items with relatively low ($< .50$) item-to-total correlations (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). Following a detailed evaluation of item-to-total correlations, we retained 10 measurement items to measure the 3 reflective constructs (1 item was dropped from each scale). LISREL 8.72 was then employed to perform a confirmatory factor analysis which revealed that the measurement model provides a very good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 47.31$, $d.f. = 32$, $p = .04$; CFI = .98, SRMR = .048; Hu and Bentler, 1999). In addition, as is summarized in Table 1, the three reflective constructs exhibit desirable psychometric properties, including measurement item unidimensionality, reliability, convergent validity and discrimi-

nant validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Gerbing and Anderson, 1988).

4.2.2. Formative measures

We used 19 items to measure the three formative constructs (role modeling, psychosocial interaction, and career benefits) employed in the conceptual model. Given that reliability is not a good indicator of measurement quality for formative indexes, the adequacy of these measures was assessed by evaluating their predictive validity. More precisely, based on the guidelines offered by Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer (2001), we specified and tested a path model for each construct in which the formative measurement items were modeled as predictors of their respective constructs. Then, we specified the overall construct (i.e., role modeling, psychosocial interaction, or career benefits) as an antecedent to the construct relationship duration.¹ In each path analysis, the significance of the association between the focal construct and the outcome variable (i.e. relationship duration) is believed to provide an indication of the external validity of the construct (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). For all three indexes we evaluated here, the path between the focal construct and relationship duration was statistically significant (role modeling: $\beta = .339$, $p < .05$; psychosocial interaction: $\beta = .153$, $p < .10$; career benefits: $\beta = .296$, $p < .05$). Collectively, these results suggest that the formative constructs are valid, and thus a meaningful test of the proposed conceptual model is possible.

5. Results

5.1. Model estimation

We estimated the conceptual model using path analytic techniques in LISREL 8.72. The results indicated that the hypothesized model fit the data relatively well. However, model

¹ Because we measured the "relationship duration" construct on an ordinal scale, we deemed traditional path analytic techniques to be inappropriate. Thus, we tested the validation path models in Mplus 3.0 using a special estimator that provides weighted least squares parameter estimates using a diagonal weight matrix (i.e., WLSM). When it is employed in Mplus, WLSM estimation is specifically designed to accommodate categorical dependent variables in a way that minimizes bias in parameter and significance estimates.

residuals and modification indexes also revealed that a significant improvement in fit could be obtained by specifying a direct path between the constructs “racial congruency” and “career advancement.” Given this finding, we respecified the model and ran it with the added path (see Fig. 1). The respecified model fit the data extremely well and performed significantly better ($p < .01$) than the original model (fit indexes: $\chi^2 = 18.64$, $d.f. = 20$, $p = .55$; CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .054, GFI = .97). Despite the tremendous improvement in fit, the freeing of the aforementioned path in the respecified model did not have a substantive effect on parameter and significance estimates. The resulting model accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in the dependent variables (role modeling: $R^2 = .08$; psychosocial interaction: $R^2 = .13$; career benefits: $R^2 = .36$; satisfaction: $R^2 = .02$; affective commitment: $R^2 = .43$).

5.2. Path estimates

The parameter and significance estimates for the model are presented in Fig. 1. The test of the conceptual model provided strong evidence in support of the hypotheses developed in this study. With the exception of Hypothesis 1B (racial similarity → psychosocial interaction), all of the estimated paths are statistically significant and in the expected direction. The non-significant association between racial congruency and psychosocial interaction is particularly noteworthy because it provides strong evidence in support for Hypothesis 1C. More precisely, it suggests that perceived racial perspective ($b = .38$, $p < .01$) has a relatively greater effect on psychosocial interaction than racial similarity ($b = -.07$, $p > .10$). Finally, it is worth noting that the control variable “supervising mentor” had a significant effect on career benefits ($b = .36$; $p < .01$) while “gender-match”, our other control variable, did not exert a significant effect on psychosocial interaction ($b = -.06$; $p > .10$).

6. Discussion and implications

This study demonstrates the importance of similarities in racial perspective on the formation and success of mentoring relationships. It contradicts notions about the value of same-race dyads as a predictor of the effectiveness of mentoring relationships, at least in organizational contexts, by suggesting that same-race dyads may inhibit career benefits in certain circumstances. Shared racial perspectives appear to be vital as these attitudes may lead to a level of personal and professional engagement that indirectly results in organizational commitment. This result is noteworthy because few researchers have examined both attitudinal and demographic similarities in the same study. The foundations of relationships are much more complex than easily identifiable demographic profiles. Perhaps if individuals in the mentoring dyad do not perceive some degree of synergy or fit based on interests, values, or experiences, there is little reason to expect the personal intimacy and socializing necessary for career rewards, regardless of race. Furthermore, human resources managers may be able to influence retention efforts by thoughtfully encouraging mentoring dyads based more on attitudinal factors rather than racial factors. In the short-term, attitudes may not change, but the organization has the ability to measure racial perspectives and encourage those relationships where perspectives are congruent while discouraging those that suggest a conflict.

This study contributes to mentoring literature in several ways. We posit directional relationships among the individual mentoring functions. Our findings suggest that psychosocial interaction is the gateway that leads to a protégés career benefits and positive role modeling behaviors. Furthermore, we find that the effects of mentoring functions on job outcomes depends on the extent to which psychosocial interaction and role modeling behavior leads to career benefits. These findings highlight the relative importance of sound career guidance as it

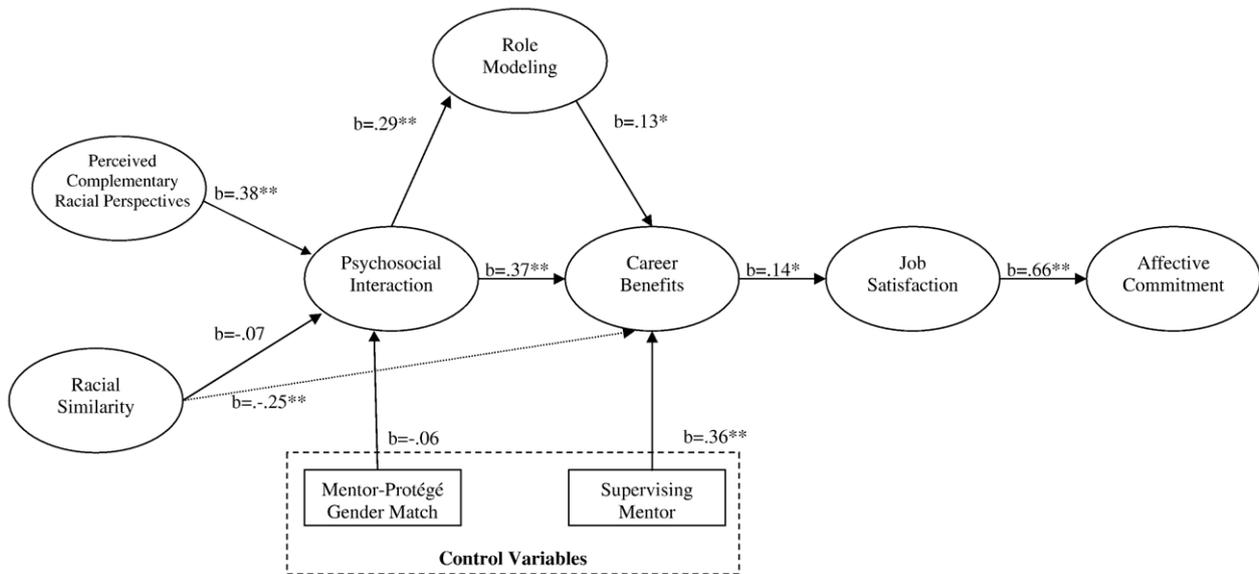


Fig. 1. Conceptual model. Notes: Dashed line indicates the path was not hypothesized and was added following initial assessment of model fit. b = Standardized parameter estimates. Significance values are based on a one-tailed t -test; $^{**}p < .01$; $^*p < .05$.

relates to job satisfaction and commitment. Moreover, while mentoring in general has been linked to job outcomes, we have attempted to examine how each dimension of mentoring relates to job outcomes related to the retention of minority managers. Understanding this growing segment of the labor market is critical for most corporations (e.g., Fullerton and Toosi, 2001), particularly in light of the fact that it experiences a higher turnover rate than other groups.

It should be noted that the study reported here has a number of limitations. It deals with racial perspectives rather than a wide range of attitudinal variables; it examines job satisfaction and affective commitment rather than the equally important outcome of performance; the sample is slightly biased towards female respondents; and the dyads involve only black protégés. The results should be viewed with these limitations in mind and further research is needed to broaden the context of study.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the National Black MBA Association for the support of this project. We also give special thanks to Jannet Thoms for her leadership and efforts in the data collection process.

Appendix A. Measurement items

Shared racial perspectives (attitudinal congruency)^{r,a}

1. My mentor and I have similar attitudes about race and racial issues.
2. My mentor and I have frequently discussed racial issues with each other.*
3. My mentor and I have similar views on the importance of racial identity.
4. My mentor and I have similar views on affirmative action.

Source: Developed using Thomas' (1993) qualitative work as a foundation.

Racial congruence

Dummy variable coded as 1 if protégé indicated being of the same race as his or her mentor and 0 if otherwise.

Role modeling^{f,a}

1. I try to imitate the work behavior of my mentor.
2. I respect and admire my mentor.
3. I will try to be like my mentor when I reach a similar position in my career.

Source: Noe (1988a)

Psychosocial interaction^{f,a}

1. My mentor has discussed my questions or concerns regarding feelings of competence, commitment to advancement,

relationships with peers and supervisors, or work/family conflicts.

2. My mentor has encouraged me to talk openly about anxiety and fears that detract from my work.
3. My mentor has shared personal experiences as an alternative perspective to my problems.
4. My mentor has conveyed empathy for the concerns and feelings I have discussed with him/her.
5. My mentor has conveyed feelings of respect for me as an individual.
6. My mentor has invited me to join him/her for lunch.
7. My mentor has asked me for suggestions concerning problems he/she has encountered at work.
8. My mentor has interacted with me socially out of work.

Source: Noe (1988a)

Career benefits^{f,a}

1. My mentor has reduced unnecessary risks that could threaten the possibility of my receiving a promotion.
2. My mentor has helped me finish assignments/tasks or meet deadlines that otherwise would have been difficult to complete.
3. My mentor has helped me meet new colleagues.
4. My mentor has assigned responsibilities to me that have increased my contact with people in the organization who may judge my potential for future advancement.
5. My mentor has given me assignments that present opportunities to learn new skills.
6. My mentor has provided me with support and feedback regarding my performance as a salesperson/manager.
7. My mentor has suggested specific strategies for achieving my career goals.
8. My mentor has given me feedback regarding my performance in my present job.

Source: Noe (1988a)

Job satisfaction^{r,a}

1. I sometimes feel my job is a waste of time (r).
2. My job is very worthwhile.
3. My job is better than most.
4. My job is worst than most (r).*

Source: Brown and Peterson (1994)

Affective commitment^{r,a}

1. I feel a strong sense of belonging to my current employer.
2. My current employer has a great deal of personal meaning to me.
3. I really feel as if my current employer's problems are my own.*
4. I would be happy to spend the rest of my career with my current employer.

5. I enjoy discussing my current employer with people outside it.

Source: McGee and Ford (1987); Brashear et al. (2006)

Supervising mentor

Dummy variable coded as 1 if protégé indicated that he or she reported to his or her mentor and 0 if otherwise.

Mentor–protégé gender match

Dummy variable coded as 1 if protégé and mentor were of the same gender and 0 if otherwise.

Duration of the relationship

How long have you had this mentoring relationship? <1 year, 2–3 years, 4–5 years, 5–7 years, >7 years.

Notes: *Item was deleted from the final analysis; a=items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1=*strongly disagree* and 5=*strongly agree*; r=construct was specified as reflective; f=construct was specified as formative.

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