



# My Mentor, My Self: Antecedents and Outcomes of Perceived Similarity in Mentoring Relationships<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the antecedents and outcomes of perceived similarity in mentoring relationships in a sample of 82 matched mentor-protégé dyads. Polynomial regression analyses were used to examine the association between actual and perceived similarity. Protégés were more likely to see themselves as similar to their mentors when they and their mentors shared either higher or lower levels of attachment security. However, sharing similar levels of relational self-construal was unrelated to protégés' perceptions of similarity with their mentors. Path analyses revealed that protégés reported more organizational and professional commitment when they saw themselves as similar to their mentors, and that these associations were mediated by protégés' reports of their mentors providing role modeling functions. These findings suggest that the effects of actual mentor-protégé similarity on perceptions of similarity may depend on the shared attribute, and provide further evidence of the importance of perceived similarity to not only mentoring relationships, but also to organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

A considerable volume of research demonstrates that mentoring -- a developmental relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced protégé (Kram, 1985) -- plays an important role in employees' work attitudes, behavior, and career development. Compared to non-mentored employees, employees with mentors experience more positive career outcomes reflecting promotion rate, compensation and career satisfaction (e.g., Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). The presence of a mentor also predicts positive employee attitudes, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions (Eby et al., 2013). Relative to the large body of research documenting that mentoring relates positively to protégé attitudes and behaviors, we know far less about how characteristics of mentors and protégés jointly affect positive protégé outcomes.

Focusing on specific characteristics of the mentor and protégé that contribute to positive protégé outcomes is important because mentoring relationships are idiosyncratic (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007) and interpersonal interactions are strongly influenced by characteristic ways of relating to others in close relationships (Back et al., 2011). Indeed, existing research has found that protégés who perceive themselves as being similar to their mentors report more positive outcomes from their relationship than those who do not have these perceptions (Eby et al., 2013). Although we know that perceived similarity is important, we know little about its antecedents, or the mechanisms through which perceived similarity relates to protégés' commitment to both the organization and their chosen profession. This lack of knowledge has important implications for mentoring scholars, who need to understand the processes through which high quality relationships are established, and practitioners, who need guidance in creating effective mentoring relationships in organizations.

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Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to extend our understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of perceived similarity in mentoring relationships. We seek to make several contributions to the literature. First, integrating classic and emerging theoretical perspectives on mentoring and identification processes in work relationships (Kram, 1985; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), we examine whether actual mentor-protégé similarity in two relationally-oriented individual differences (attachment security and relational self-construal) relates to protégés' perceptions of similarity to their mentors. As explained below, these two deep-level characteristics are highly relevant to mentoring relationships, in that both assess general ways of viewing close relationships and the self. Second, we extend existing research by examining whether and how perceived similarity in mentoring relationships predicts protégés' commitment to their organizations and their chosen professions. This builds on existing work suggesting that a mentoring relationship may serve as a lens by which an employee develops beliefs about his or her organization (Baranik, Roling, & Eby, 2010), and informs our theoretical understanding of how mentoring contributes to the protégé's professional identity (Kram, 1985). Third, we contribute to mentoring theory by explaining the processes through which perceived similarity in mentoring relationships predicts outcomes. Extending and integrating existing theoretical perspectives, we examine role modeling — a type of mentor function characterized by the protégé's identification with the mentor (Kram, 1985) — as a key mediating mechanism. Our model and the relationships investigated in this study are shown in Fig. 1.

### 1.1. Mentoring and Perceived Similarity

Two recent meta-analyses find that protégé perceptions of similarity to mentors are consistently related to positive mentoring outcomes. Eby et al. (2013) found that meta-analytic correlations between deep-level similarity (i.e., protégés' perceptions of similarity to their mentors in terms of attitudes, values, beliefs, or personality) and protégé perceptions of mentoring were consistently large, ranging from .38 for instrumental support to .59 for relationship quality. Similarly, Ghosh (2014) found mean meta-analytic correlations of .42 between perceived similarity and career mentoring and .60 between perceived similarity and psychosocial mentoring. These results support the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), which posits that we are attracted to those who are similar to ourselves because they reinforce and validate our beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

Although perceived similarity is a consistent predictor of mentoring experiences, we know little about what predicts perceived similarity in mentoring relationships. Most research has examined demographic similarity between mentors and protégés (i.e., gender, race) and has found it is either not related or is weakly related to protégé perceptions of similarity (Allen & Eby, 2003; Lankau, Riordan, & Thomas, 2005; Turban, Dougherty, & Lee, 2002). In discussing existing gaps in the literature on perceived similarity, Turban and Lee (2007) argue that actual similarity in characteristics that are interpersonally-oriented may be particularly important to examine in the context of understanding the effects of mentoring relationships on protégés.

Although there are no studies examining actual mentor-protégé deep-level similarity and protégé perceptions of similarity, some studies have examined these relationships in supervisor-subordinate dyads. These studies have found significant associations between self-reported personality characteristics of managers and subordinates and their perceptions of similarity (Strauss, Barrick, & Connerley, 2001; Wexley, Alexander, Greenawalt, & Couch, 1980). Huang and Lun (2006) found a significant interaction between actual supervisor-subordinate similarity in growth need strength and perceptions of similarity, but only at certain levels of the growth need strength trait. Researchers in this area observe that the effects of similarity may depend not only on the level of the trait, but also on the trait itself (Huang & Lun, 2006). In the case of mentoring, it is important to examine traits and characteristics that reflect the interpersonal closeness of the relationship. Mentoring relationships often involve a close emotional bond that reflects intimacy and vulnerability (Kram, 1985; Wu, Foo, & Turban, 2008). There are individual differences in how people approach relationships (cf., Aron, 2003), and mentoring scholars have theorized that attachment orientation and self-construal are two individual difference variables that may play a key role in affecting perceptions and expectations of mentoring relationships and their outcomes (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). As discussed below, attachment orientation and relational self construal reflect individuals' characteristic

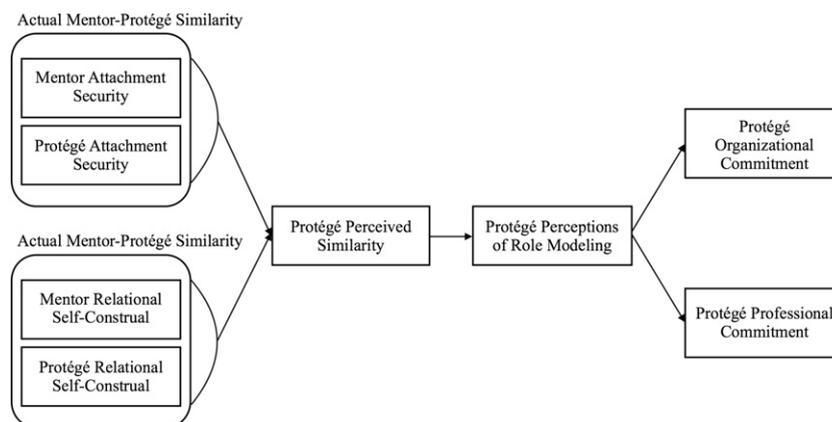


Fig. 1. Proposed theoretical model.

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