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# Mentoring others: A dispositional and motivational approach<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Dispositional and motivational variables related to the propensity to mentor others and to the provision of career and psychosocial mentoring were examined. Results indicated that prosocial personality variables (other-oriented empathy, helpfulness) related to willingness to mentor others and also accounted for unique variance beyond variables associated with life and career stages. Other-oriented empathy related to actual experience as a mentor. Results also indicated that motives for mentoring others differentially related to psychosocial and career mentoring.

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## 1. Introduction

Individuals who mentor others are widely recognized as playing a vital role within organizations. Mentors are typically defined as individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing support to and increasing the career advancement of junior organizational members, their protégés (Kram, 1985). Furthermore, mentors serve as a key source for ensuring the continuation of knowledge within organizations and for grooming junior employees (Kram & Hall, 1996). Mentoring relationships continue to be recognized as an important aspect of career development for both mentors and protégés (cf. Dreher & Ash, 1990; Kram, 1985;

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Scandura, 1992; Turban & Dougherty, 1994; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). Although research concerning mentoring benefits continues to accumulate, research on factors related to willingness to mentor others and mentor variation in mentoring behavior is sparse.

Given the considerable amount of time and commitment required on the part of mentors, not all individuals are motivated or inclined to assume this role. Those who do mentor others may have different motives underlying their willingness to engage in this activity (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Kram, 1985). Individuals who take on a mentorship role are generally thought to provide two broad categories of behavior or functions to their protégés that are referred to as career and psychosocial (Kram, 1985). However, the extent that a mentor provides these functions can vary considerably (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Research examining variation in the provision of career and psychosocial mentoring has tended to focus on variables such as race and gender. Relatively little is known about individual differences (outside of demographic factors) that may help explain differences in mentoring behavior.

The purpose of the present study was to extend our understanding of the propensity to mentor others and the provision of mentoring functions from the perspective of the mentor. Building on social psychological and organizational behavior theories of prosocial behavior, the present study had two main objectives. The first was to identify individual difference variables related to the propensity to mentor others. Specifically, the relationship between prosocial personality characteristics (other-oriented empathy and helpfulness) with experience as a mentor and with willingness to mentor others was examined. The second objective was to examine the extent prosocial personality characteristics and personal motives for mentoring others explain variation in the provision of career and psychosocial mentoring functions.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Historically, the conceptual foundation for research on mentoring others has been drawn from career and life stage theories (e.g., Kram, 1985). Career theory suggests that mentoring others is an important developmental component of both life and career stages (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Feldman, 1988; Kram, 1985). Life stage theorists such as Erickson (1963), Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978), and Levinson (1986) view mentoring others as a process that occurs during the midcareer years when individuals reassess their career and life accomplishments. Mentoring others during this time provides the midcareerist with a sense of accomplishment and a means for obtaining generativity. Moreover, according to Levinson et al. mentors are often career-plateaued and receive intrinsic satisfaction from passing along wisdom to junior colleagues. Mentoring others also plays a prominent role in career stage theories. For example, in Dalton, Thompson, and Price's (1977) four-stage model of professional career development, serving as a mentor is a key activity associated with the third stage. Taken together, these theories suggest mentors seek mentoring relationships with others primarily to serve their own developmental needs.

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