



Mentor-protégé commitment fit and relationship satisfaction in academic mentoring

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ABSTRACT

Based on a sample of students and their faculty mentors, this study examined how the fit between mentor and protégé levels of commitment is associated with both partners' relationship satisfaction. Mentoring dyads were classified into groups according to fit between partners' commitment, and relationship satisfaction was compared across groups. Overall, results provided partial support for our hypothesis that mentors and protégés report greatest satisfaction when commitment levels are mutually high. Specific results varied depending on the source of reported commitment levels (i.e., mentor vs. protégé reports). Implications are discussed in terms of the importance of both mentor and protégé commitment.

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1. Introduction

Scholarly interest in mentoring relationships has grown considerably over the past several decades. Mentoring has been shown to benefit individuals across the lifespan (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). For example, mentoring has been shown to be a deterrent of risky youth behavior (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) and graduate students who establish strong mentoring relationships with their academic advisors report enhanced personal and professional development (Huwe & Johnson, 2003). Within the workplace, mentoring has been associated with a variety of career benefits (Allen, Eby, Poteat, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Less is known regarding interpersonal factors that contribute to mentoring effectiveness. One theoretically important, but understudied driver of successful mentoring relationships is commitment (Allen & Eby, 2008; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005).

Although commitment is a relatively new construct within the mentoring literature, it has been investigated within the interpersonal relationships literature for quite some time. Researchers in the area of interpersonal relationships have emphasized the importance of commitment, referring to it as a fundamental property of relationships (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Empirical evidence supports this claim, revealing that commitment predicts important pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Van Lange et al., 1997). Such findings have led mentoring researchers to examine whether commitment plays a role in mentoring relationships, as well.

Thus far, commitment research on mentoring relationships has focused on the role of the mentor's commitment. Overall, findings have shown greater mentor commitment to be associated with positive outcomes such as mentor and protégé reports of relationship satisfaction and formal mentoring program effectiveness (Allen & Eby, 2008; Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). However, in addition to examining mentor commitment, researchers have called for an investigation of the role of protégé commitment (Allen & Eby, 2008; Allen et al., 2006). To our knowledge, there have been no

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studies examining protégé commitment to the mentoring relationship. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine the role of both mentor and protégé commitment. More specifically, this study examined how the fit between mentor and protégé commitment was associated with relationship satisfaction within an academic mentoring context. Relationship satisfaction is a key outcome to study given that it is an indicator of success for all forms of relationships (Allen & Eby, 2003). Importantly, this study also answers the call for more research that examines dynamics between both mentors and protégés simultaneously as opposed to solely from the perspective of the mentor or the protégé (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008).

1.1. Commitment in interpersonal relationships

Within the interpersonal relationships literature, commitment has been defined in terms of three components: (1) intent to persist, (2) long-term orientation, and (3) psychological attachment (Finkel et al., 2002). Researchers have examined the outcomes associated with both level of commitment and mutuality of commitment (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). In general, research has consistently shown that higher levels of commitment are associated with healthy functioning in relationships. For example, Drigotas et al. (1999) found a positive relationship between level of commitment and couple well-being.

Researchers define mutuality of commitment as the degree of similarity in partners' levels of commitment to their relationship (Drigotas et al., 1999). Nonmutuality exists when an individual is either more committed or less committed than his or her partner. As expected, Drigotas et al. found that mutuality of commitment was positively associated with couple well-being. One explanation the authors provided for this finding was that the negative emotions accompanying nonmutuality are detrimental to well-being. For example, individuals who are more committed to their relationship than their partner may experience anxiety, insecurity, and mistrust, which may lead to decreased well-being. Similarly, individuals who are less committed to their relationship than their partner may experience unwanted responsibility, irritation, guilt, or resentment, which may also have a negative effect on couple well-being. In support of this explanation, Drigotas et al. found that negative affect was negatively related to mutuality of commitment and mediated the relationship between mutuality and well-being. Thus, it appears that both level and mutuality of commitment are important in relationships, with the greatest well-being achieved when partners are equally and fully committed to each other.

1.2. Commitment in mentoring relationships

Within the mentoring literature, commitment has been examined in each of the three major areas of mentoring: youth mentoring, workplace mentoring, and academic mentoring. As mentioned earlier, the focus has been on the role of mentor commitment, with the overall finding that mentor commitment is associated with positive outcomes (e.g., Allen & Eby, 2008; Allen et al., 2006; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005; Sipe, 2002). For example, in a study of formal mentoring, Allen and Eby found that protégé and mentor reports of mentor commitment were positively related to protégé reports of relationship quality. In a study examining student–faculty mentoring relationships, Ortiz-Walters and Gilson found mentor commitment to be positively associated with mentor relationship satisfaction. Thus, the link between commitment and relationship satisfaction found in research on interpersonal relationships appears to apply to mentoring relationships.

1.3. The current study

In response to the recent call for studies that investigate the roles of both mentor and protégé commitment in mentoring relationships, we examined the association between mentor and protégé commitment and relationship satisfaction. More specifically, we examined how the fit between protégé and mentor levels of commitment was associated with protégé and mentor relationship satisfaction. In general, research on commitment in the interpersonal and mentoring relationships literature suggests that level of commitment and mutuality of commitment are positively associated with favorable relationship outcomes. Based on this general finding, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Protégé relationship satisfaction is greatest in mentor–protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually high, compared to: (1) mentor–protégé pairs in which the protégé is more committed than the mentor; (2) mentor–protégé pairs in which the mentor is more committed than the protégé; and (3) mentor–protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually low.

Hypothesis 2. Mentor relationship satisfaction is greatest in mentor–protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually high, compared to: (1) mentor–protégé pairs in which the protégé is more committed than the mentor; (2) mentor–protégé pairs in which the mentor is more committed than the protégé; and (3) mentor–protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually low.

Hypotheses were tested in three different ways. First, hypotheses were tested using mentor and protégé self-reported levels of commitment. It was predicted that mentors and protégés would be most satisfied when their self-reported levels of commitment were mutually high. Second, the hypotheses were tested by using protégé reports of their own commitment and protégé reports of their mentors' commitment (i.e., perceived mentor commitment). In accordance with Hypothesis 1, protégés were expected to report greatest satisfaction when they reported that they and their mentor were mutually

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