



What affects willingness to mentor in the future? An investigation of attachment styles and mentoring experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of attachment styles and mentoring experiences on willingness to mentor in the future in a formal mentoring program in China. For both mentors and protégés, avoidance and anxiety dimensions of attachment styles and their interaction had a significant influence on willingness to mentor in the future. Mentoring experiences explained unique variance in willingness to mentor beyond attachment styles. Crossover analysis of matched mentor–protégé pairs showed that mentoring functions fully mediated the mentor avoidance – protégé willingness to mentor relationship. The interaction between protégé avoidance and anxiety was directly related to mentor willingness to mentor in the future. Directions for research and implications for managerial practice are provided.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring has been widely recognized as providing protégés with benefits including increased compensation, promotional opportunities, and career satisfaction (e.g., Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Underhill, 2006). For mentoring relationships to be successful, mentors must be willing to invest time and energy sharing their experiences and providing career and psychosocial support to protégés (Kram, 1985). However, many individuals feel uncomfortable assuming the role of the mentor (Allen, 2003). Understanding the factors that influence formal mentoring program participants' willingness to mentor in the future is critical for ensuring program viability (Allen, Poteet, Russell, & Dobbins, 1997; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

This study makes two contributions to the literature. First, it examines how attachment styles, individual differences based on attachment theory, and mentoring experiences, particularly those that occur within the context of a formal mentoring program, influence individuals' willingness to mentor in the future. Attachment theory can help us gain insight into how the significant interpersonal relationships mentors and protégés have experienced in their lives help shape their reactions to and how they approach mentoring relationships in an organizational context (see Bravo & Yuan, 2006; Wang, Greenberger, & Noe, 2003). Second, this study helps us understand the generalizability of Western mentoring theory and research to Chinese mentoring relationships. Although China is the largest transitional economy in the world and mentoring relationships in the Chinese workplace are more prevalent than in the Anglo-Saxon setting (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006), this is one of only a few mentoring studies using a Chinese sample (Aryee, Lo, & Kang, 1999; Bozionelos & Wang, 2006). Cultural factors such as collectivism and power distance likely have a different influence on mentoring relationships in China compared to Western cultures. We would expect that compared to more individualistic Western cultures such as the US, the influence of

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individual difference variables such as attachment styles are constrained in China's highly collectivistic culture (Hofstede, 1993; Mischel, 1977). Also, individuals' motivation and willingness to mentor may be even more important in China's high power-distance culture compared to Western cultures because protégés are expected to be loyal and obedient (Louie, 1980).

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Attachment theory and attachment styles

Attachment theory is useful for understanding any adult relationship that provides (1) proximity with an attachment figure especially in times of stress or need, (2) a safe haven (an attachment figure provides comfort and encouragement when an individual is in stress), and, (3) a secure base from which an attached individual derives a sense of security and can confidently explore the world on his/her own (e.g., Ainsworth, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). Attachment theory has been used in studies of friendships, romantic and parental relationships, and leader–follower relationships (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Doherty & Feeney, 2004). Attachment theory is especially relevant for studying mentoring relationships because mentoring relationships can be considered to be close relationships at work. Mentors have often been referred to as attachment figures such as father or parental figures by their protégés (Ainsworth, 1991; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978). The formal and informal psychosocial and career-related functions mentors provide to protégés are similar to the safe haven and secure base provided by parental figures according to attachment theory. Also, attachment theory suggests that differences in attachment styles influence individuals' willingness to participate and level of involvement in close relationships such as mentoring relationships.

Bowlby (1973) theorized that individuals build their inner working models of the world and of the self from their experiences. The inner working models have two dimensions: others which refers to whether or not others are usually perceived as being generally dependable and available for support and help, and self which refers to self-evaluation as either worthy or unworthy of others' help, care, and value. The inner working models are believed to have a profound influence on individuals' attitudes, emotions, behaviors, and responses to social interactions.

Consistent with the internal working models of self and others emphasized in attachment theory, recent attachment research uses a four-category model of attachment based on the underlying dimensions of anxiety and avoidance (Bartholomew, 1990; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998). Anxiety assesses the extent to which individuals worry about being rejected by others and believe they are unworthy of others' care, value, and support. Avoidance assesses the extent to which individuals are uncomfortable with closeness, therefore limiting their interdependence with others. The two-dimensional model results in four prototypic attachment styles: secure (low anxiety–low avoidance), preoccupied (high anxiety–low avoidance), dismissing (low anxiety–high avoidance), and fearful (high anxiety–high avoidance). Based on recommendations in attachment research, in this study attachment styles are considered to vary along the continuums of avoidance and anxiety and the term “attachment styles” is retained even when it is not analyzed as a categorical variable (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Fraley & Waller, 1998).

Attachment styles are developed early in life and shape individuals' perceptions and behaviors in interpersonal experiences (Collins & Read, 1994). Because individuals learn about providing support partly through their own attachment experiences, their attachment styles are linked to attitudes and beliefs towards caregiving and serving as support providers (Kunce & Shaver, 1994). Willingness to mentor can be considered a type of caregiving because it relates to intentions to provide support to less experienced individuals, protégés.

Effective mentors feel comfortable working with their protégés and devote considerable time and effort to supporting and developing the relationship (e.g., Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005; Ragins et al., 2000). Attachment theory suggests that individuals high in avoidance usually view others as unreliable, unresponsive, and feel uncomfortable getting close to them. They value independence, self-reliance and tend to limit closeness and interdependence with others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Avoidant caregivers tend to be less proximity seeking and less likely to offer support (Feeney & Collins, 1998; Fraley & Shaver, 1998). Thus, we expect highly avoidant individuals who are predisposed to distance themselves from close relationships to be less willing to serve as a mentor in the future.

Individuals high in anxiety like proximity but have a relatively negative view of self (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and tend to depend on others' acceptance for their sense of well-being (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Anxiety has been shown to be associated with low social self-confidence and self-esteem and less responsiveness to others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Collins & Read, 1990). Because mentors are expected to provide support to protégés (Noe, 1988), anxious individuals who often worry about being rejected, not accepted, or devalued by others are likely unwilling to serve as mentors. The following hypotheses will be tested using both the mentor and the protégé samples.

Hypothesis 1. Avoidance will be negatively related to willingness to mentor in the future.

Hypothesis 2. Anxiety will be negatively related to willingness to mentor in the future.

Individuals low in avoidance tend to be comfortable developing close relationships with others and having others depend on them (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Consistent with attachment theory which suggests an interaction between avoidance and anxiety results in four prototypic categories of individuals who approach, perceive, and behave differently in close relationships, we expect the avoidance–willingness to mentor relationship is moderated by anxiety. Individuals

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