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Mentoring receipt and personality: Evidence for non-linear relationships[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The research investigates the relationship of the Big-Five of personality with mentoring receipt with the use of two independent studies. The findings of the studies show substantial consistency. Equations of quadratic form describe half of the tested relationships better than linear equations. The association of openness to experience and agreeableness with mentoring receipt is of inverted U-shape. The benefits of being open and agreeable for mentoring receipt cease to exist at high values of these traits. On the other hand, emotional stability and conscientiousness demonstrate exclusively positive linear relationships with mentoring receipt. The form of the relationship of extraversion differs between the two studies, but the overall trend is positive. The substantial quadratic component in the association of personality with receipt of mentoring means that research hitherto may be grossly underestimating the effects of personality on developmental relationships because earlier studies assume strictly linear associations. Parts of the results also imply that the associations of certain personality traits with mentoring receipt may depend upon the occupational context.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring in the work place is a developmental relationship between two individuals, the mentor and the protégé. Within that relationship the mentor provides a variety of career-related (e.g., challenging assignments, exposure and visibility, and coaching) and socioemotional (e.g., friendship, counseling and role modeling) functions for the protégé (Kram, 1985). Substantial empirical research on mentoring in the past quarter of a century demonstrates its connection with outcomes that are of benefit to individuals, including career success of protégés (e.g., Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004) or mentors (Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006; Bozionelos, 2004a); firms, including work attitudes of protégés and mentors (e.g., Bozionelos, Kostopoulos, & Polychroniou, 2011; Dawley, Andrews, &

Bucklew, 2010; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Richard, Ismail, Bhuian, & Taylor, 2009); or both individuals and organizations, as mentoring receipt relates to better learning results for protégés (Lankau & Scandura, 2002).

Apart from outcomes, however, antecedents of mentoring are also important. For example, identification of individual characteristics that increase the likelihood of mentoring receipt can contribute towards advice and development programs to assist those with deficits in those features. Personality is an individual characteristic that deserves attention in this sense. Mentoring reflects interpersonal processes. Personality influences such processes (Wiggins & Trapnell, 1996) and, hence, personality traits must play a role in mentoring receipt (Tokar, Fischer, & Subich, 1998; Turban & Lee, 2007). In particular, personality manifests itself through motives and behaviors (e.g., Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998). These should affect receipt of mentoring both because of actions of protégés (e.g., actively approaching a mentor in order to enhance their own image or seeking the views of an existing mentor in order to satisfy their inquisitiveness) and because of actions of mentors towards protégés (e.g., an industrious employee may attract a mentor or a mentor may prefer to provide more advice to a receptive than to a non-receptive protégé).

The idea that personality plays substantial part in interpersonal processes and outcomes, such as mentoring receipt, adheres to the dispositional perspective to organizational behavior (e.g., see Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986; Staw & Cohen-Charash, 2005). The dispositional view

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asserts that enduring dispositional traits, such as personality, determine individual outcomes across situations and settings, and through time. With respect to the present theme, this means that individuals with similar personality profiles must show consistency across settings and over time in the extent to which they receive mentoring. Hence, information on one's personality can enable the informed prediction of whether this individual will develop mentoring relationships.

However, despite the importance of the issue, empirical research on the link between mentoring receipt and personality is limited, as authors stress (Dougherty, Cheung, & Florea, 2007; Turban & Lee, 2007). Most importantly, extant research, albeit certainly contributory, has two drawbacks. First, that research is inconsistent in utilization of personality framework. Existing studies utilize a variety of frameworks, including the instrumentality-expressiveness (Fagenson, 1989; Kirchmeyer, 2002; Scandura & Ragins, 1993) and the needs model (Fagenson, 1992; Fagenson-Eland & Baugh, 2001), isolated traits (Allen et al., 2009; Wang, Tomlinson, & Noe, 2010) or collections of isolated traits (Aryee, Lo, & Kang, 1999; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). This hinders the extraction of parsimonious conclusions because of different degrees of compatibility between personality frameworks and overlap between their traits. For example, extant studies employ the traits of instrumentality, locus of control, Type A personality, need for power, and self-monitoring. These traits overlap in various degrees (e.g., Lippa & Connely, 1990; Morrison, 1997). However, neither do these traits refer to the same construct, nor do they share the same characteristics, nor do they overlap to the same degree. Therefore, utilization of a single personality framework that contains mutually orthogonal traits and provides a comprehensive description of human personality will improve clarity and enhance understanding.

Second, research so far investigates only relationships of linear nature between personality and mentoring receipt. However, the presence of curvilinear relationships is within reason. Ignoring the presence of curvilinearity can lead to erroneous conclusions over the nature and magnitude of associations (e.g., Iversen, Malchow-Moller, & Sorensen, 2010; Trevor, Gerhart, & Boudreau, 1997), and that includes associations between personality and its outcomes (Vasilopoulos, Cucina, & Hunter, 2007). These limitations suggest that additional investigations on the subject may be beneficial.

2. The present research

The research here investigates the relationship between personality and mentoring receipt from both a linear and a quadratic (in particular, inverted U-shaped) perspective with the utilization of the Big-Five personality framework. The Big-Five, which contains the five mutually orthogonal traits of emotional stability, extraversion, openness to experience (hereinafter "openness"), agreeableness and conscientiousness, has accumulated extensive empirical support on its validity (e.g., Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1996; Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997).

Furthermore, the Big-Five possesses the critical properties of parsimony and comprehensiveness, because the model describes human personality in terms of a manageable number of traits that encompass virtually every aspect of the personality sphere (see, for example, Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004; O'Connor, 2002). In addition, the structure of the Big-Five is robust across cultures (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Schmitt et al., 2007). This signifies that conclusions on the relationship between personality and mentoring within a particular culture can serve as reference point in the consideration of that relationship within other national cultural contexts. This is of importance in light of the state of globalization today (e.g., Al Ariss, 2010).

Because of the above critical properties, the Big-Five holds the status of the most acceptable trait personality theory (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). An illustration of its widespread acceptance as parsimonious descriptor of human personality is that serious criticisms of its validity and comprehensiveness virtually ceased

after the mid 1990s (see review by John et al., 2008). This recognition accompanies the model in organizational research too, where authors use the Big-Five as the personality framework of reference (see, for example, Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007).

To illustrate, meta-analytic research employs the Big-Five to conclude on the link of personality with a host of processes and outcomes in the work environment, ranging from key constructs such job performance (Barrick et al., 2001; Chiaburu, Oh, Berry, Li, & Gardner, 2001), work motivation (Judge & Ilies, 2002), work attitudes (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002), and leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002) to less prominent constructs, such as entrepreneurial intentions (Zhao, Seibert, & Lumpkin, 2010). Therefore, utilization of the Big-Five taxonomy when investigating the relationship of mentoring receipt with protégés' personality will maximize the contribution of the research (see also Turban & Lee, 2007).

2.1. Conceptualization and measurement of mentoring receipt

For validity purposes researchers must clearly define the type of mentoring relationship the research focuses on (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011). This step is necessary because forms of mentoring relationships (e.g., formal, informal, vertical and horizontal) vary in terms of dynamics (Allen et al., 2008); which means that simultaneous consideration of various types of mentoring increases the likelihood of confounding. In the present research the focus is exclusively on informal traditional mentoring, which refers to a naturally evolving developmental relationship between two members of the same organization who are of unequal status. The reasons are the following: first, informal traditional mentoring represents the prototype mentoring relationship (e.g., Eby, 1997; Higgins & Kram, 2001); second, as they evolve naturally such relationships are more likely to reveal the role of personality. This is because effects of personality are most discernible in situations of low external constraints (Whithey, Gellatly, & Annett, 2005). Formal mentoring arrangements, for example, conform to certain rules and regulations, hence, they certainly impose more interactional constraints than informal mentoring relationships; and third, informal mentoring accrues more benefits than formal mentoring (Underhill, 2006). Therefore, informal traditional mentoring must have priority in novel investigations.

The present research conceptualizes and measures mentoring received as the totality of the mentoring experience of the individual. This conceptualization encompasses both whether the individual has ever had relationships with mentors and the amount of mentoring the individual has received in those mentoring relationships.

3. Hypotheses

The development of hypotheses makes use of only those extant studies that employ Big-Five traits (i.e., the studies by Aryee et al., 1999 and by Turban & Dougherty, 1994). The reason is the imperfect fit of non-Big-Five traits into the Big-Five model, which seriously compromises the validity of pertinent conjectures (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Salgado, 1997). Hence, in the research at hand development of hypotheses primarily draws upon logical reasoning, and secondarily upon findings of the very limited existing empirical research on personality and mentoring that employs traits of the Big-Five.

Although linear relationships have priority in terms of testing in social sciences, relationships of curvilinear nature also demand consideration, especially when adequate logical underpinning exists (e.g., Jackofsky, 1984; Williams & Livingstone, 1994). The form of non-linear relationship that appears likely in the association between mentoring receipt and personality is the quadratic. Quadratic relationships exist in two forms, U-shaped and inverted U-shaped. U-shaped relationships signify associations that are negative and positive for low and high values of predictor variables, respectively.

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