



Transformational leadership, learning goal orientation, and expectations for career success in mentor–protégé relationships: A multiple levels of analysis perspective

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Abstract

Prior research has assumed that traditional mentor–protégé relationships based on mutual learning and development orientations operate at the dyadic level of analysis. This study examines this assumption by providing a multiple levels of analysis (individual and dyad) test of the relationships among learning goal orientation, transformational leadership, and expectations of career success (career achievement, development, and balance) reported by 217 mentors and their protégés from 11 different industries. Results of within and between analysis (WABA) indicated that learning goal orientation/transformational leadership and transformational leadership/expected career balance relationships were based on differences between dyads. Learning goal orientation/expected career success and transformational leadership/expected career achievement and development relationships were based on differences between individuals. Implications for research and practice on mentoring relationships are discussed.

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“People who look through keyholes are apt to get the idea that most things are keyhole shaped.”
—Unknown

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1. Introduction

Social cognitive theories of career development highlight the importance of learning and developmental relationships in elevating expectations of career success (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Mentoring relationships in organizations represent learning and developmental relationships (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Several theories have been proposed to describe how mentor–protégé relationships form based on mutual learning and development orientations; those include theories of mentoring functions (Kram, 1985), personal learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002), human development (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), social support or helping (McManus & Russell, 1997), leader–member exchange (Thibodeaux & Lowe, 1996), and transformational leadership (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). These theories assume that the traditional mentor–protégé relationship is a *dyadic-level phenomenon* that develops based on mutual personal learning and development orientations of the mentor and protégé and has outcomes for both parties.

To date, this assumption has not been specified explicitly in the conceptualization of mentoring nor has it been tested explicitly in empirical work on mentoring. However, as noted by several writers (e.g., Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino, 1984; Glick & Roberts, 1984; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; Rousseau, 1985), levels of analysis must be a part of both conceptualization and testing of constructs. Failure by prior researchers to address this issue is unusual since the traditional form of mentoring has typically been described as a *dyadic* exchange relationship that develops based on perceived similarity and mutual attraction (Ragins, 1997) and offers benefits to both mentors and protégés (Kram, 1985). This view would be manifested in between-dyad differences and within-dyad agreement in responses of mentors and protégés and indicate that mentoring relationships may operate at the dyadic level of analysis.

Other research streams indicate that mentors and protégés bring their own unique personal characteristics (e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996), attributional, perceptual, and cognitive processes (Mullen, 1994; Ragins, 1997), and expectations (Ragins & Scandura, 1994) into their relationships. These personal attributes would be manifested in individual differences in responses of mentors and protégés and therefore indicate that mentoring relationships may operate at the individual level of analysis. Overall, therefore, these competing theoretical explanations suggest that mentoring relationships may operate at the individual and dyadic levels of analysis and beg for specification and examination of level of analysis issues in mentoring studies. Unfortunately, a complete investigation of boundary conditions for mentoring models, expressed as levels of analysis, which include a priori hypotheses and measures from multiple levels of analysis, has not yet been reported in the literature. Moreover, most previous research has examined same-source protégé or mentor ratings of variables associated with mentorship (Ragins, 1997).

To address these concerns, in the present study, two alternative levels of analysis (individuals and mentor–protégé dyads) are specified and examined with different-source (mentor and protégé) data to assess relationships among transformational leadership, learning goal orientation, and expected career success, variables associated with the traditional form of mentorship. Accordingly, we followed recommendations outlined in Klein and Kozlowski (2000) and others to explicitly consider levels of analysis issues in conceptualization and testing of these relationships. We hypothesize and test the relationships between these constructs at the individual level (the typical approach used in the literature) before asserting and testing them at a higher level of analysis (i.e., the dyadic level where the literature suggests the traditional form of mentoring relationships should operate).

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