



Are bad experiences stronger than good ones in mentoring relationships? Evidence from the protégé and mentor perspective

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined the relative importance of good versus bad mentoring experiences in predicting subjective states associated with the mentoring relationship. Study 1 examined the protégé perspective and found general support for the proposition that, on average, bad is stronger than good in predicting protégé outcomes. Study 2 adopted the mentor perspective and found mixed support for the prediction that, on average, bad is stronger than good. The results are discussed in terms of advancing research and theory on the relational processes associated with mentoring in the workplace and the need to consider the relational context to more fully understand the relative predictive power of good and bad mentoring experiences.

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Workplace mentoring refers to a developmentally oriented relationship between a less experienced, junior employee (the protégé) and a more experienced, seasoned employee (the mentor) where the goal is personal and professional development of the protégé (Kram, 1985). Several decades of research document the potential benefits of mentoring for protégés (Allen, Eby, Butts, Lockwood & Simon, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng & DuBois, 2008). While less extensively examined, there is also evidence that mentors can benefit from mentoring (for a review see Allen, 2007).

Notwithstanding the positive aspects of workplace mentoring, it is important to recognize that like other types of relationships, mentors and protégés can experience difficulties in their relationship (Eby, Durley, Evans & Ragins, 2008; Eby & McManus, 2004; Eby, McManus, Simon & Russell, 2000; Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000). Although early theoretical perspectives held that mentors and protégés can have positive and negative relational experiences (Kram, 1985; Levinson, Darrow, Levinson, Klein & McKee, 1978), research to date has solely examined either the positive (good) (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990) or the negative (bad) (e.g., Eby, Durley, et al., 2008; Eby, Durley, et al., 2000) aspects of mentoring. This is problematic since mentoring relationships are likely to have both positive and negative aspects. For example, a mentor may help advance a protégé's career by recommending the protégé for important assignments or introducing the protégé to influential people within the organization (a positive relational experience). However, this same mentor may have an abrasive or intimidating interpersonal style, which the protégé finds difficult to deal with (a negative relational experience). Likewise, a protégé may be able to enhance a mentor's job performance by providing technical assistance (a positive relational experience) but be unresponsive to constructive feedback from the mentor (a negative relational experience). Moreover, when reflecting on specific aspects of a mentoring relationship, individuals should be able to make estimates of how good or bad, on average various aspects of the relationship are for them. Research on other types of close relationships finds that negative relational events consistently carry more weight than do positive relational events (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). This mirrors the general finding that negative experiences, emotions, and cognitions tend to be more predictive of outcomes than positive ones (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001). However, these insights have not been applied to the field of mentoring.

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We use research and theory on positive–negative asymmetry effects and evolutionary psychology to pursue two main objectives. First, we directly compare the relative importance of the average amount of good versus bad mentoring experiences in predicting a range of subjective states associated with the relationship. This answers the call for mentoring scholars to examine a broader range of mentoring outcomes than those associated with instrumental gains (e.g., promotions, job attitudes, compensation) (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Kram & Ragins, 2007) and to focus more specifically on relational outcomes. Second, we examine the relative importance of the average amount of good versus bad mentoring experiences from the protégé's perspective (Study 1) and then ascertain whether a similar pattern of effects are found from the mentor's perspective (Study 2). Examining viewpoints of both mentors and protégés is important because the relative impact of good and bad mentoring experiences may vary based on one's role in the relationship.

This research effort has both theoretical and practical implications. No research to date has simultaneously considered the good and the bad in mentoring relationships and systematically compared their relative predictive strength. Doing so will not only provide a more balanced perspective on mentoring but also will significantly enhance our understanding of these influential and common work relationships. Our research will also provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of mentoring relationships and offer a solid empirical platform for the development of theory on relational processes in mentoring. Such a focus has been advocated in the positive organizational scholarship literature (e.g., Fletcher & Ragins, 2007) and in the mentoring literature (Eby, 2007; Kram & Ragins, 2007; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). On a practical level, our results may help practitioners put mentoring in its proper perspective and lead to a more balanced discussion of the potential pros and cons of mentoring relationships.

Relational experiences associated with mentoring

Both protégés and mentors can experience good things in a mentoring relationship. Good mentoring experiences for protégés are those associated with the receipt of two distinct types of support. Career-related support consists of various, specific mentoring functions which enhance the protégé's professional development (e.g., exposure and visibility, sponsorship, and coaching). Psychosocial support consists of several specific mentoring functions which geared more toward building protégé self-efficacy, self-worth, and professional identity (e.g., friendship, acceptance and confirmation) (Kram, 1985). For protégés, good mentoring experiences predict a wide range of outcomes including psychological health and well-being, job and career attitudes, career success, and relationship satisfaction (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004; Eby, Durley, et al., 2008).

Mentors can also have good mentoring experiences (cf., Ragins & Scandura, 1999). For example, mentors report feelings of personal satisfaction from helping their protégés develop and experience generativity (Erickson, 1963), which is the belief that one is contributing to future generations. Mentors may also report enhanced job performance if protégés offer needed technical skills and may receive organizational recognition for their efforts. The relationship can also offer a loyal base of support from the protégé. Good mentoring experiences are positively associated with mentor reports of relationship quality, stronger intentions to mentor in the future, and more favorable attitudes (e.g., Allen, Poteet & Burroughs, 1997; Bozionelos, 2004; Gentry, Weber & Sadri, 2008; Eby, Durley, et al., 2008; Eby, Lockwood & Butts, 2006).

Research finds that both protégés and mentors can also report bad mentoring experiences. The most common bad experience reported by protégés is mentor–protégé mismatches (e.g., differences in values, personalities, work styles). Neglect can also occur if the mentor is perceived as not interested in helping the protégé develop. Protégés can also report lack of expertise (technical or interpersonal) or manipulative behavior (e.g., taking undue credit, sabotage) on the part of mentors. Finally, protégés report that some mentors exhibit general dysfunctionality, stemming from personal problems or negative attitudes that can negatively impact their relationship (Eby et al., 2000, 2004). Protégés' perceptions of bad experiences are correlated with a wide range of outcomes, including negative reactions to the relationship, strain reactions, and less favorable attitudes (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby et al., 2004).

Mentors can also report bad experiences with protégés (Eby, Durley, et al., 2008; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Eby & McManus, 2004). Protégé performance problems involve the protégé failing to meet the mentor's expectations or being perceived as unwilling to learn. Interpersonal problems involve conflicts, disingenuousness on the part of the protégé, and other difficulties, such as over-submissiveness. Destructive relational patterns are more intense, and involve a breach of trust, relationship exploitation, sabotage, as well as jealousy and competitiveness toward the mentor. Mentor reports of bad experiences with protégés are related to less favorable work attitudes, strain reactions and reduced relationship quality (Eby, Durley, et al., 2008).

An important point about good and bad mentoring experiences is that they are both conceptually and empirically distinct (Eby, Durley, Evans & Ragins, 2006; Eby et al., 2004). In other words, the absence of good mentoring does not necessarily mean that bad mentoring has occurred, and vice versa. To illustrate, a protégé that reports that his or her mentor does not provide much coaching, sponsorship, or opportunities for visibility within the organization (all good career-related support experiences) is not necessarily indicating that the mentor lacks expertise, is manipulative, or neglectful (all bad types of mentoring experiences). However, an important caveat in our research is that we are examining overall perceptions of the average amount of good and bad mentoring experiences. Therefore, we cannot make conclusive statements about the relative "goodness" or "badness" of particular relational experiences. We also are not able to examine non-linear change; for example, how a particularly positive (or negative) experience may alter subjective and affective reactions to the relationship.

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