



## Protégé anxiety attachment and feedback in mentoring relationships

Tammy D. Allen\*, Kristen M. Shockley, Laura Poteat

*The University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA*

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### ABSTRACT

A model focused on protégé anxious attachment and feedback in mentoring relationships was tested with a sample of matched doctoral student protégés and their faculty mentors. Results show that protégé anxious attachment was associated with less feedback seeking and less feedback acceptance. Protégé feedback acceptance was associated with both the quality and frequency of feedback provided by the mentor. Frequency, but not quality of mentor feedback, was associated with protégé scholarly productivity. Results underscore the value of focusing on specific behavioral aspects of the mentoring process.

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### Anxiety attachment and feedback in mentoring relationships

Feedback between mentors and protégés is a critical component of mentoring relationships. The importance of feedback to the individual learning and development process has long been emphasized (McCauley & Hezlett, 2002). Protégés expect feedback from their mentor and use that feedback to help improve personal performance (Mullen, 1994). Mentors desire protégés who are open and receptive to the feedback provided by them (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). Given the critical role of feedback in mentoring relationships, it is surprising that feedback variables have largely been ignored in the research literature. The current study advances the mentoring literature by testing feedback variables based on one specific type of developmental relationship, doctoral advisor–student relationships.

Our study makes several contributions to the mentoring literature. First, we examine anxious attachment style as a key individual difference variable implicated in the feedback process. This provides a theoretical foundation for the study while also answering the call for research that examines individual differences that contribute to mentoring processes (Turban & Lee, 2007). Second, our focus on feedback provides a concrete behavioral focus for examining effective mentoring. The investigation of specific mentoring behaviors has been overshadowed by the emphasis placed on the career and psychosocial mentoring functions framework developed over 20 years ago (Kram, 1985). Although the investigation of career and psychosocial mentoring functions has resulted in a wealth of accumulated knowledge that has advanced the mentoring literature, almost exclusive reliance on this framework for studying what occurs within mentoring relationships has detracted from honing in on specific mentoring behaviors. By conducting research that targets finer-grained aspects of the functions that mentors provide, such as feedback, we may garner a more comprehensive understanding of effective mentoring. Third, we examine productivity as our dependent variable. The mentoring literature is dominated by research examining career success outcomes such as salary, or affective outcomes such as job satisfaction (see Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004 for a meta-analytic review). Yet mentoring relationships are often touted as a means of improving performance. Mentor feedback should directly contribute to this outcome. Thus, this study adds to the few that have examined performance outcomes (e.g., Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006).

\* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, The University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, PCD4118G, Tampa, FL 33620-7200, USA. Fax: +1 813 974 4617.

E-mail address: [tallen@mail.usf.edu](mailto:tallen@mail.usf.edu) (T.D. Allen).

### *Theoretical background and hypotheses development*

Attachment theory provides a theoretical platform for understanding feedback within mentoring relationships. The basic tenet of attachment theory is that we form relatively stable attachment styles in early childhood based on interactions with our primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). One's working attachment model influences reactions to relational events, creating "systematic patterns of expectations, needs, emotions, emotion regulation strategies and social behavior" (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002, p. 134). Those with a secure attachment are comfortable with intimacy and autonomy. Secure attachment is a life span need, thus, these attachment styles continue to influence our relational styles in adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

As an interpersonal relationship, mentorships can serve attachment functions (e.g., Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wang, Noe, Wang, & Greenberger, 2009). As noted by Noe et al., attachment theory may provide insight into how prior interpersonal relational experiences shape the way that protégés approach mentoring relationships. This may be especially true in student–faculty mentoring relationships given that the faculty member often serves a parental-type role.

Current attachment theory suggests that there are two adult attachment dimensions, anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The anxiety dimension is associated with a negative model of the self (Brennan et al., 1998). Because the purpose of the present study was to investigate feedback within the mentoring relationship, which poses a threat to the self, we focused on the anxiety dimension. Individuals with greater attachment-related anxiety are preoccupied with thoughts about relationships and the need for approval. They are often worried about whether their partner is available, responsive, and attentive.

Based on theory and research from the feedback literature, there are reasons to expect that individuals with a more anxious attachment style may be less likely to seek feedback and be less accepting of feedback provided. Although feedback serves several important functions in organizational behavior, such as permitting individuals to adjust their goal directed behavior, better assess their capabilities, and become socialized into new environments (Anseel, Lievens, & Levy, 2007), there are also costs (Ashford, 1986). Individuals may be concerned that seeking feedback will convey uncertainty to others. Feedback seeking could be viewed as a sign of low ability or of insecurity (Williams, Miller, Steelman, & Levy, 1999). Soliciting feedback carries the risk of hearing negative information about the self. Because individuals are highly motivated to defend and protect their egos (Baumeister, 1999), they may avoid feedback for self-protection purposes (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). This is likely to be more pronounced in anxiously attached individuals, as they tend to doubt themselves as a relationship partner. Feedback seeking also may be avoided because feedback based on active solicitation is more difficult to disregard than is unsolicited feedback (Roberson, Deitch, Brief, & Block, 2003).

Anxiously attached individuals may also be less receptive to feedback. Attachment behavior is most likely to be activated in situations that involve threat, stress, or challenge, all of which could occur when a mentor provides feedback (Feeney, 2005). When anxious attachment behavior is triggered it also activates accessibility of negative self-thoughts, causing individuals to be especially defensive when receiving personal feedback (Broemer & Blumle, 2003). Another relevant aspect of anxious attachment is negative appraisal of others' attempts to offer help. Feedback provided by others is likely to be viewed with mistrust (Bowlby, 1988). Prior research has shown that college students with preoccupation attachment tendencies (a component of anxious attachment) have difficulty seeking help from others and are mistrustful of those who offer guidance (Larose & Bernier, 2001). In summary, there is considerable theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that protégés with an anxious attachment style are likely to avoid feedback seeking behavior and be less accepting of feedback provided.

**Hypothesis 1a.** Protégé anxious attachment negatively relates to protégé feedback seeking.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Protégé anxious attachment negatively relates to protégé feedback acceptance.

The feedback seeking actions of the protégé should relate to the frequency of feedback provided by the mentor. Within the feedback literature we are not aware of research that has linked target feedback seeking and acceptance with other feedback frequency. However, protégé feedback seeking may be viewed as a form of proactive behavior, and within the mentoring literature there is some evidence that protégé proactive behaviors are associated with more mentoring received (Turban & Lee, 2007). Thus, we expect that protégé feedback seeking will prompt the mentor to provide more frequent feedback to the protégé.

**Hypothesis 2.** Protégé feedback seeking positively relates to frequency of mentor feedback.

The extent that the protégé accepts feedback is also important. Research has shown that mentors desire protégés who are open to feedback. Mentors interviewed by Allen et al. (1997) reported that they were more likely to provide mentoring to others who were receptive to advice. Huwe and Johnson (2003) note that in order to maintain a successful doctoral student–mentor relationship it is essential for protégés to avoid becoming defensive, angry or deflated in response to mentor feedback. Protégé feedback acceptance sends a message to the mentor that feedback is wanted and appreciated. Accordingly, mentors may be more motivated to provide feedback and strive to provide feedback that is of high quality.

**Hypothesis 3a.** Protégé feedback acceptance positively relates to frequency of mentor feedback.

**Hypothesis 3b.** Protégé feedback acceptance positively relates to quality of mentor feedback.

Finally, we predict that feedback frequency and quality relate to protégé scholarly productivity. Frequent and high quality feedback from the mentor should enable the protégé to develop and be productive as a student scholar. Feedback is an important component of motivational theories such as goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002) and control theory (Carver & Scheier, 2000). Both of these

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