



What keeps people in mentoring relationships when bad things happen? A field study from the protégé's perspective

Hannah G. Burk*, Lillian T. Eby

The University of Georgia, 228 Psychology Bldg., Athens, GA 30602, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the association between negative mentoring experiences and protégé intentions to leave the mentoring relationship. The role of perceived mentoring alternatives and fear of mentor retaliation was also examined as moderators of the relationship between negative mentoring experiences and intentions to leave. Results indicate that several types of negative mentoring experiences predict intentions to leave the mentoring relationship. In addition, three moderation effects were found. The results are discussed in terms of enhancing our understanding of mentoring relationships in the workplace.

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The major focus of research on mentoring has been the positive aspects and outcomes of mentoring for the protégé. A meta-analysis by Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima (2004) supported the relationship between mentoring and several protégé outcomes, including increased compensation, higher salary, higher job satisfaction, higher career satisfaction, greater organizational commitment, greater career commitment, and greater intentions to stay with the organization. Mentoring is also related to better organizational socialization (Chao, 2007), greater learning (Ploeg, de Witt, Hutchinson, Hayward, & Grayson, 2008), and less turnover (McDonald, Erickson, Johnson, & Elder, 2007). Despite the potential benefits of mentoring, the outcomes and experiences are not always positive. In any close personal relationship, there will be both positive and negative relational experiences (Wood & Duck, 1995). This is true of mentoring relationship as well (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004; Eby & McManus, 2004; Ragins & Scandura, 1997).

A small but growing body of literature has examined the negative aspects of mentoring relationships. Negative mentoring experiences have been shown to relate to less learning, lower amounts of psychosocial and career support, greater depressed mood at work, greater psychological job withdrawal (Eby et al., 2004), as well as lower job satisfaction, increased turnover intentions, and higher stress for protégés (Eby & Allen, 2002). In fact, Ragins, Cotton, and Miller (2000) found that individuals without experience as a protégé sometimes expressed more positive job and career outcomes than protégés that were in dysfunctional or dissatisfying relationships. This suggests that being in a mentoring relationship where one has negative experiences could be worse than having no mentor at all.

Interestingly, we know from research on other types of close relationships that sometimes individuals stay in relationships even when bad things happen (e.g., Choice & Lamke, 1999). In fact, research on negative mentoring finds that many protégés who report being in a mentoring relationship report negative experiences with their current mentors (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000). Therefore, an important but completely neglected area of research is investigating the reasons why a protégé may remain in a relationship characterized by negative experiences. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by integrating the social psychology, mentoring, and management literatures to investigate two specific mechanisms that may influence a protégé's decision to stay in a mentoring relationship that is marked by negative experiences. These proposed mechanisms are lack of alternative mentoring partners and fear of mentor retaliation. It is also important to note that our focus on negative relational experiences is not meant to suggest that mentoring relationships are not simultaneously influenced by both positive and negative

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: burk.hannah@gmail.com (H.G. Burk), leby@uga.edu (L.T. Eby).

relational experiences. In fact, a protégé's positive experiences in a mentoring relationship are also likely to influence his or her decision to remain in the relationship. As such, in order to examine the unique effects of negative mentoring experiences, protégé reports of positive mentoring experiences will be held constant (statistically controlled for) in order to pinpoint the unique effects of negative mentoring experiences on intentions to leave a the relationship.

This research effort has both theoretical and practical implications. The literature on negative mentoring experiences continues to grow and recent research finds that negative experiences in mentoring relationships actually carry more weight than do positive ones in terms of predicting protégé outcomes (Eby, Butts, Durley, & Ragins, 2010). This underscores the importance of identifying the nomological network associated with this phenomenon. This will provide a more nuanced understanding of mentoring relationships and the factors that sustain these relationships even in the face of negative relational experiences. On a practical level, our results may aid in the design of formal mentoring programs. For example, we may find that protégés are hesitant to leave a mentoring relationship marked by negative experiences due to an absence of alternative relational partners. If so, organizations might consider having pool of potential mentors in case a relationship is not working out. Or, if fear of retaliation on the part of the mentor prohibits a protégé from leaving a relationship this would suggest the need for greater accountability systems, relationship evaluations, and strategies for protégés to safely and easily exit a negative relationship.

Theoretical overview

Some theoretical work has attempted to overlay mentoring relationships onto established social psychology theories. One such example is provided by Scandura (1998) who integrated mentoring relationships with a typology of the "dark side" of close interpersonal relationships created by Duck (1994). In this work, Scandura identified four potential mentoring dysfunctions: negative relations (bullies, enemies), sabotage (revenge, silent treatment, career damage), difficulty (conflicts, binds), and spoiling (betrayal, regret, mentor off fast track). As noted by Eby and colleagues (2000), this work is important because it provides a theoretical framework for examining the negative side of mentoring. Scandura's (1998) typology also notes that mentoring dysfunction can be marked by either bad intent toward one's partner (negative relations, sabotage) or good intent toward one's partner (difficulty, spoiling), a point that we return to later when discussing the circumstances under which a protégé may or may not choose to leave a mentoring relationship marked by negative experiences.

Defining negative mentoring

Negative mentoring has been defined in terms of dysfunctional mentoring outcomes, such as dissatisfaction (Scandura, 1998) and by specific negative experiences with mentors (Eby et al., 2000). Although research finds that the proportion of negative or dysfunctional mentoring relationships is low in comparison to positive relationships (Ragins & Scandura, 1997), this should not be taken to mean that negative mentoring experiences are low base rate phenomena. In a study of both positive and negative mentoring experiences, Eby and colleagues (2000) found that over half of participants reported encountering negative mentoring experiences at some point in their careers. An important feature of negative mentoring experiences is that the absence of malice on the part of the mentor does not preclude a relationship from experiencing problems (Eby et al., 2000; Scandura, 1998). For instance, a mentor may not sufficiently aid the protégé in attaining his or her goals or there may be interpersonal problems between the mentor and the protégé that thwart relationship effectiveness. Following these definitions, the current study focuses on negative experiences that may occur in a mentoring relationship.

Dimensionality of negative mentoring

Eby and colleagues (2000) identified five distinct types of negative mentoring experiences: general dysfunctionality, mismatch within the dyad, lack of mentor experience, manipulative behavior, and distancing behavior. General dysfunctionality occurs when the mentor has personal problems that may interfere with his or her ability to effectively mentor the protégé or when the mentor shows a negative attitude towards the organization and his or her work. Mismatch within the dyad occurs when one or both parties report that there is a mismatch in values, work styles, and/or personality. Lack of mentor expertise takes place when the protégé perceives the mentor as deficient in interpersonal or technical skills. Manipulative behaviors include mentor misuse of position power (e.g., dictatorial mentor behavior, inappropriate delegation) and mentor politicking (e.g., sabotage, deceit, and credit taking). Lastly, distancing behavior is present when the mentor neglects or intentionally excludes his or her protégé from important meetings or events as well as when the mentor is perceived as not having time for the protégé.

Often, if a relationship becomes negative, one or both parties may choose to leave the relationship (Ragins et al., 2000; Scandura, 1998). While Kram (1985) states that the separation phase of a mentoring relationship occurs naturally when the protégé has developed and no longer needs the mentor for personal and professional growth, this phase may be spurred on as a result of a negative relationship that is not providing the protégé with developmental aid. Moreover, Eby (2007) notes that relational problems can lead to a protégé to exit a relationship when negative experiences serve to undermine the protégé's personal and professional growth. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the protégé's report of negative mentoring experiences will be positively related to the intention to leave the relationship.

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