

# The role of mentoring in promoting organizational commitment among black managers: An evaluation of the indirect effects of racial similarity and shared racial perspectives

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## Abstract

Due to the effort and expense of recruiting black managers, there is a need to maximize the chances of retaining those that are most productive. Effective mentoring may be one avenue to reach this objective by enhancing job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Using the responses of 139 members of the National Black MBA Association (MBMBAA), this study explored the indirect or mediated effects of demographic (i.e. white mentors–black protégés vs. black mentors–black protégés) and attitudinal (i.e. perceived complementary racial perspectives) similarity on the affective commitment of black managers. The results suggest that attitudinal similarity is a more critical factor than demographic similarity in enhancing mentoring-driven affective commitment among black managers. In addition, the results reveal that in certain circumstances demographic similarity can actually have an adverse impact on the career benefits realized from mentoring relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

In a qualitative study of cross-race dyads, [Thomas \(1993\)](#) found that when colleagues in cross-race mentoring relationships shared complementary racial perspectives (i.e. common attitudes about race and race-related issues), their relationships tended to evolve into rewarding, mentor–protégé relationships. In contrast, when partners in cross-race mentoring relationships shared non-complementary racial perspectives, their relationships seemed to achieve suboptimal, “sponsor–protégé” relationships. This notion of shared racial perspectives seems vital in the determination of effective cross-race mentoring relationships and is the primary focus of the research reported herein.

Generally, the functions of a mentor are considered career (instrumental) and psychosocial ([Burke, 1984](#); [Kram, 1985](#)).

Career functions include sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and providing challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. According to [Thomas \(1993\)](#), mentors provide both career and psychosocial guidance, whereas sponsors provide only career guidance. This study assesses the relative influence of perceived complementary racial perspective (PCRP) and racial (i.e. demographic) similarity on mentoring functions and the ultimate outcomes of mentoring relationships involving minority protégés.

Given the effort and expense of recruiting minority managers, retention is a key concern for many organizations (e.g., [Jackson and Alleyne, 2005](#)). Job satisfaction ([Futrell and Parasuraman 1984](#); [Sager et al., 1988](#)) and affective commitment ([Chandrasekaran et al., 2000](#); [McNeilly and Russ 1992](#)) are important outcomes from the point of view of retaining black managers. With this in mind, this study examines the extent to which PCRP and racial similarity influence black protégés' 1) perceptions of his/her mentor's behaviors and 2) job satisfaction and attitudinal

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commitment. It attempts to capture the perceptions of black protégés involved in same-race and cross-race relationships in order to address questions related to how firms might best develop and ultimately retain their minority hires through mentoring programs.

## 2. Cross-race mentoring relationships

Diversified mentoring relationships are composed of mentors and protégés who differ on one or more group memberships associated with power in an organization (Ragins, 1997). Recognizing that models based on white male samples may not generalize to these groups, several studies have attempted to understand how cross-gender diversified mentoring relationships might differ (e.g., Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a; Ragins, 1989). Although some studies have focused on race and cross-race relationships (e.g., Gonzalez-Figueroa and Young, 2005; Thomas, 1990, 1993), in general, the number of studies is limited (Cianni and Romberger, 1995). Furthermore, despite evidence that suggests that same-race relationships have a positive impact on a relationship's success, the evidence is inconclusive (Davidson and Foster-Johnson, 2001).

Thomas (1990) conducted a study that consisted of data from 88 black and 107 white managers. One of his key research questions was: "In what ways do same-race and cross-race relationships differ (p. 481)?" A key hypothesis was that protégés in same-race relationships would receive more psychosocial support than those in cross-race relationships. The results revealed that same-race relationships indeed provide more psychosocial support than cross-race relationships for both blacks and whites, though the level of career support provided did not differ. Thomas suggested that the relatively limited psychosocial support that blacks receive in cross-race developmental relationships is due to the impact of racial dynamics being most tangible after the relationship moves beyond an initial career focus.

Thomas (1993) again explored racial dynamics in cross-race developmental relationships. He conducted a field study of 22 cross-race (black and white) work relationships to determine how various approaches to handling racial differences might lead to differing levels of the relationship. His findings suggest that when colleagues in cross-race developmental relationships share a complementary racial perspective their relationship tends to evolve into a mentor–protégé relationship. In contrast, when colleagues in cross-race developmental relationships differ in their perspective on race, the relationship seems incapable of reaching its full potential.

Ensher et al. (2002) examined how perceived attitudinal similarity, in terms of general outlook, values, and problem-solving approach, and demographic similarity (i.e., cross-race versus same-race and cross-gender versus same-gender) affected protégés' support and satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. Recognizing that both demographic similarity and perceived attitudinal similarity constitute an overall evaluation of perceived degree of similarity, they attempted to determine the relative importance of each aspect on outcomes of the relationship. They found that perceived attitudinal similarity was indeed a better predictor of protégés' satisfaction with and support from mentors

than was demographic similarity. Importantly, their sample may not generalize to corporate settings; in addition to the limited number of black respondents, it did not include corporate managers.

## 3. A model of the relative impact of perceived racial perspective and racial congruence

### 3.1. Conceptual model

Based on Thomas' (1993) and Ensher et al.'s (2002) findings, the proposed model suggests that PCRCP and racial similarity will both be positively related to psychosocial interaction, with the former having a greater relative impact on psychosocial interaction than the latter. Consistent with social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1985) and similarity-attraction (Byrne, 1971; Lincoln and Miller, 1979) theories, as well as empirical support for the effects of demographic and perceived attitudinal similarity on mentoring behavior, the model highlights that ongoing interaction between mentors and protégés is likely to be most effective when both parties share similar racial viewpoints.

**H1a.** PCRCP is positively related to psychosocial interaction.

**H1b.** Racial similarity is positively related to psychosocial interaction.

**H1c.** PCRCP has a relatively greater effect on psychosocial interaction than demographic similarity (i.e., a same race dyad).

The model suggests that psychosocial interaction is a central construct that represents the conduit through which overall perceived degree of similarity influences the protégé's perception of his/her mentor's career behaviors, as well his/her desire to imitate his/her mentor. A protégé will model his/her mentor's behavior and perceive career guidance after he/she senses or directly experiences a genuine comfort level with this individual. This might include a sense of mutual respect or some common mind-set beyond the technical aspects of the job. Because psychosocial interactions with a mentor are likely to expose the protégé to unique insights, habits, and even unannounced opportunities, they likely serve as a causal precedent to career benefits. Furthermore, we expect that such encounters are likely to result in role-modeling behaviors which, ultimately, are likely to engender career benefits.

**H2a.** Psychosocial interaction is positively related to role-modeling benefits.

**H2b.** Psychosocial interaction is positively related to career benefits.

**H3.** Role-modeling behavior is positively related to career benefits.

Allen et al. (2004) demonstrated a robust relationship between mentoring and job satisfaction and suggest that the most consistent benefits of mentoring are on affective reactions to the workplace. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are well-established constructs in organizational research and turnover literature in particular (Brashear et al., 2006;

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