



Mentor status, occupational context, and protégé career outcomes: Differential returns for males and females

Thomas W. Dougherty^{a,*}, George F. Dreher^b, Vairam Arunachalam^a, James E. Wilbanks^c

^a University of Missouri-Columbia, USA

^b Indiana University, USA

^c University of Arkansas-Little Rock, USA

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ABSTRACT

We report two studies examining the moderating effects of mentor status and protégé gender, along with the moderating role of occupational context, in the relationship of mentoring with protégé career outcomes. Our research replicates and extends previous findings, especially those by Ramaswami et al. (2010b). Results from Study 1 indicated that business school alumni with senior-male mentors earned more compensation than those with no mentors. Additionally, a 3-way interaction (protégé gender \times senior-male mentor \times occupation type) indicated that the senior-male mentor effect for compensation was especially prominent for females in male-gendered occupation types. Study 2, conducted in an aerospace manufacturing firm comprising both a male-gendered occupation and industry context, confirmed mentor-status by protégé gender interaction for compensation. Female protégés with senior mentors received more compensation than females with no mentors, and also more compensation than males with senior mentors. In contrast, protégés with “other” (not senior) mentors received less compensation than those with no mentors, with this negative effect being especially strong for females. Taken as a whole, these results confirm the importance of mentor status for protégé career success. The results also underscore the importance of considering both mentor attributes and work context in understanding male and female protégés’ career returns from mentoring.

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1. Introduction

More than 30 years of research on mentoring has confirmed the value of mentoring relationships for protégé outcomes ranging from career advancement to compensation to subjective benefits such as self-esteem and job satisfaction (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Chandler, Kram, & Yip, 2011; Dougherty & Dreher, 2007; O'Brien, Biga, Kessler, & Allen, 2010). Not surprisingly, both scholars and practitioners have shown a keen interest in whether all employees can be expected to benefit from mentoring, or if the value of mentoring varies according to factors such as gender, race, or socioeconomic status. For example, any findings that protégé gender interacts with mentoring – such that females benefit less than males – could be central to our understanding of important social phenomena such as the glass ceiling and the optimal utilization of high-potential female talent (Giscombe, 2007; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007; Ragins, 1999).

Gender differences in careers and career success have been extensively studied in research on management and organizations (Judge & Livingstone, 2008). These differences are typically seen as influenced by developmental, interactional, and situational factors at work (Ragins & Gonzalez, 2003; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). More specifically, much of the mentoring literature

* Corresponding author at: Robert A. Trulaske, Sr. College of Business, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO 65211, USA.

E-mail address: doughertyt@missouri.edu (T.W. Dougherty).

suggests that mentoring relationships are particularly important for the career success of women in organizations (e.g., Burke & McKeen, 1990, 1994; Ragins, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Tharenou, 2005). In this vein, gender was included as a key factor in the conceptual model of the mentoring process proposed by Wanberg, Welsh, and Hezlett (2003), and is thought to be influenced by and interact with features of the organizational context. Scandura and Ragins (1993) also noted the importance of understanding the value of mentoring for women, especially those in male-gendered occupations and industries, because women in such settings can be isolated as tokens, and consequently face special career challenges (Kanter, 1977).

Our two-study investigation included (1) business school graduates of two universities, employed in diverse settings, and (2) software engineers in an aerospace manufacturing firm—a male-gendered occupational and industry context. Our research replicates and extends previous work by Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, and Wiethoff (2010b) in further contributing to an understanding of the interrelationships of mentor status, gender, and male-gendered work contexts with protégé career success. Replicating the earlier initial findings is important for convincingly demonstrating the interplay among these particular factors for career attainment. Moreover, in addition to replication, we extend the previous work by operationalizing gendered work context in a more refined manner, based upon *occupational* (versus *industry*) context. We also were able to include some control variables not often available in mentoring research, allowing for additional ruling out of “third variable” explanations for mentoring–outcome relationships. In terms of our specific focus, we provide further insight into the importance of senior mentors – especially senior male mentors in male-gendered occupational contexts – for the returns from mentoring for women versus men.

An appropriate overall theoretical perspective for our research is Spence's (1973) signaling theory. Mentoring scholars have often argued that mentoring benefits protégés because the protégés' connection to high-status senior managers is a signal of their value within the organization. A key theme of our research is that these signals are likely to be more salient in certain work and occupational contexts. Ramaswami et al. (2010b) expanded signaling theory by introducing the concept of “signal strength,” which is relevant to our focus on senior-male mentors, and which has a basis in the power perspective on mentoring (Ragins, 1997a, 1997b). In addition to signal strength, Ramaswami and colleagues proposed the concept of “signal visibility” to delineate where and for whom senior-male mentors serve as not only strong, but also highly visible signals in organizations.

Our research focus also reflects a small stream of previous mentoring research focusing on the importance of mentor attributes for protégé career success (e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996), an area of inquiry that has still not received much attention (O'Brien et al., 2010). Similarly, the earlier work by Ragins (1997a, 1997b) underscored the potential importance of diversity research to address the role of intergroup status and power relations as a determinant of one's organizational experiences. Thus, we also acknowledge the value of taking a power perspective in the study of mentoring, focusing on status indicators such as protégé gender, mentor gender, and mentor's position in the organization.

Furthermore, we note that as a broader issue, research on gender in the workplace has been limited by this general lack of concern for organizational context, including such factors as industry and occupational context. For example, Ely and Padavic (2007) asserted that to understand gender in organizations, researchers should explicitly include organizational context in their research designs, examining the linkages of contextual factors with individual difference variables. The idea here is to insure that “the context of the study is theorized as a conceptual construct, operationalized as a variable in the study and that the variance associated with the context is directly incorporated in the analysis” (Griffin, 2007, p. 859).

In summary, consideration of the issues just discussed points to the need for more investigation of the value of high-status (e.g. senior-male) mentors for male and female protégés' career success, and insight into how these phenomena operate in male-gendered versus other settings. Incorporating both the perspectives of power in diverse mentoring relationships and also signaling theory, we contribute to mentoring theory and research by enhancing our understanding of potentially important but relatively unexamined moderators of the mentoring–career success relationship.

As we discuss next, a review of empirical studies statistically testing for gender-by-mentoring interactions reveals a complex and inconsistent pattern of results. This complex pattern of results may reflect differences in occupational contexts linked to gender. In our research, in addition to examining gender by mentoring interactions in clearly male-gendered occupations, we also explicitly considered the organizational status of the mentor.

2. Protégé gender-by-mentoring interactions for career attainment

Ramaswami et al. (2010b) reported that although many studies have examined protégé gender-by-mentoring interactions as related to protégé outcomes, only four previous studies relevant to their research objectives had examined such interactions on career success. These studies revealed an inconsistent pattern of results. For example, Burke (1984) found male mentors of management trainees to have greater influence on women's than on men's career progress. Ragins and Cotton (1999), in a combined sample from four occupations, found that male protégés with a history of male mentors had higher compensation (but not promotions) compared to other mentor-protégé gender combinations. However, female protégés with a history of male mentors had more compensation than females with a history of female mentors, and higher promotion rates than any other gender combination. Tharenou (2005) did not specifically focus on protégé gender-by-mentor interactions, but using employees from various industries in Australia did find that male protégés with male mentors spent less time without a promotion, and were promoted more the previous year than did women with male mentors. However, Dreher and Cox (1996) found no support for the hypothesis that the linkage of having a White male mentor with compensation would be greater among White male MBAs than among female MBAs or non-White male MBAs. These four studies also tended to mix informal and formal mentoring relationships.

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