



## The Mentoring Relationship Challenges Scale: The impact of mentoring stage, type, and gender

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### ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the role of relational challenges as reported by 309 protégés in various stages and types of mentoring relationships. The Mentoring Relationship Challenges Scale (MRCS) was newly constructed using the results of an earlier qualitative study (Ensher & Murphy, 2005). The scale measured three factors of relational challenges which were: Demonstrating Commitment and Resilience, Measuring Up to a Mentor's Standards, and Career Goal and Risk Orientation. The results demonstrated that with respect to mentoring stages, those protégés in the beginning stages of their relationships reported experiencing significantly fewer challenges related to Demonstrating Commitment and Resilience than those in the mature or ending stages of the relationship. Also, it was found that the type of mentoring relationship (traditional, step-ahead, or peer) affected the prevalence of the three types of challenges. Protégés in peer relationships reported significantly fewer of all three types of challenges than those in step-ahead or traditional relationships. However, contrary to predictions, there were no significant differences found between those in informal versus those in formal mentoring relationships. As expected, protégé and mentor gender interacted significantly. Female protégés reported experiencing significantly fewer challenges related to the factor of Measuring Up to a Mentor's Standards, than did male protégés. Also, female protégés reported experiencing a significantly higher degree of relational challenges related to Career Goal and Risk Orientation from their male mentors than from their female mentors. Finally, after controlling for perceptions of career and psychosocial support for protégés in traditional mentoring relationships, two of the three relational challenges factors remained significant and explained a significant amount of variance in overall satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. This suggests that relational challenges, at least for traditional mentoring relationships, serve as an important mechanism to impact overall relationship satisfaction.

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### Introduction

"Hilda began by asking me: 'What's your budget? She said, 'I need you to raise this much money by this date.' That was my test. She said, 'You come back, and when you tell me you have raised \$10,000 then we'll talk again.' And she told me exactly how you do it. She said, 'You call all your friends. You make a list of 100 people who may give you \$100. You make another list of another 50 people who may give you \$200. And come back, and when you've done that and you've got your \$10,000, then let's talk again'" (as cited in Ensher & Murphy, 2005, pg. 129).

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The above quote depicts a mentoring relational challenge given by Hilda Solis, the current United States Secretary of Labor to her protégé, Sharon Martinez, (formerly Mayor of Monterey Park in Southern California). At the time of the interview in 2005, Solis (D-CA) was serving as a member of the United States House of Representatives and Sharon Martinez was an up and coming politician. Past research has found that relational challenges are common in interpersonal relationships such as those between intimate partners (Gottman, 1993; Tannen, 1995), friends (Gains, 1994), and even coworkers (Fletcher, 1999). However, more recently, researchers have begun to examine the impact of relational challenges on mentoring relationships as well (Eby, 2007; Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Kalbfleisch, 2007). A mentoring relational challenge can be defined as a unique test or a series of challenges posed to assess a mentoring partner, and can be used as a means to determine further investment into the relationship (Ensher & Murphy, 2005). This study provides a unique empirical examination of mentoring relational challenges leading to a better understanding of mentoring processes and practices.

A mentor is defined as one of a network of helping relationships who provides emotional and career support and can serve as a role model (Ensher & Murphy, 2005). There has been an increased wealth of research from academics (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Ragins & Kram, 2007; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003) and a great deal of attention paid to mentoring in the popular press (Higgins & Kram, 2008). Mentoring as a practice and program has increased in popularity not only in the United States but also globally (Clutterbuck, 2007). Moreover, formal mentoring programs have become an integral part of many organizations' approach to human resource development (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007).

### *Mentoring prevalence and benefits*

Why has the practice and study of mentoring proliferated so rapidly and in such a far reaching manner? It is likely because the benefits related to mentoring are substantial, not only for individual protégés and mentors, but also for their organizations (Noe et al., 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003). Protégés with effective mentors earn greater compensation, are promoted more rapidly, and have greater career mobility than those with ineffective mentors or no mentoring at all (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Dreher & Cox, 1996; Hezlett & Gibson, 2005). Not only do protégés benefit from mentoring relationships, but mentors derive important benefits from the relationship. Mentors report a renewed sense of commitment and excitement to their professions and organization as well as a sense of satisfaction at being part of the development and growth of their protégé (Allen et al., 2004; Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006; Noe et al., 2002).

Organizations benefit as employees communicate more effectively, increasing their sense of loyalty and organizational commitment, and turnover is reduced (Butyn, 2003; Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997; Hegstad & Wentling, 2004; Perrone, 2003). Mentoring has also been acknowledged as a highly useful tool for the attraction of new employees and their subsequent socialization (Benabou & Benabou, 2000; Singh, Bains, & Vinnicombe, 2002) and as an aid in the development and retention of high potential talent (Hegstad & Wentling, 2004; Payne & Huffman, 2005).

Although mentoring is proven to be highly useful it is not always beneficial for all individuals. In fact, there has been a burgeoning focus on the negative aspects or "the dark side" of the mentoring relationship. The quality of mentoring relationships can vary dramatically and a bad mentor may indeed be worse than none at all (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). Researchers have investigated the negative aspects and have identified specific toxic mentoring behaviors including bullying, jealousy, abuse, neglect, and credit-stealing (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2008). Protégés can also be responsible for relationship problems by betraying trust, damaging the mentor's reputation or simply ignoring the mentor or being ungrateful (Eby & Allen, 2002). It would be simplistic to assume that mentoring relationships are either completely good or completely bad. Instead, like other types of close relationships, most mentoring relationships have both positive and negative aspects. Mentoring relationships may flow through times that vary in the satisfaction they provide and their effectiveness (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007).

### *Mentoring theories relevant to relational challenges*

Researchers have begun to probe more deeply into the intricacies of relationship dynamics to determine how and when a mentoring relationship deteriorates or thrives and what can be done to increase mentoring relationship effectiveness (Eby, 2007; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Kalbfleisch, 2007). Previous research in mentoring (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Ugrin, Odom, & Pearson, 2008) has suggested that social exchange theory (Foa & Foa, 1974; Homans, 1961) and the norm of reciprocity provides a reasonable explanation for understanding mentoring processes. According to previous research, social exchange theory suggests that mentors provide certain resources to a protégé which might include their connections, their skills, feedback or any number of instrumental or psychosocial dimensions. In return mentors expect reciprocity from their protégés whether that might be appreciation, a new skill, or a fresh perspective (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). In sum, what mentors and protégés give and receive might be very different but must be seen as valuable by both parties.

Eby (2007) extends the ideas of social exchange and provides a comprehensive review of relational problems in mentoring. Eby provides an investment model of mentoring. The Eby mentoring investment model suggests that both mentors and protégés evaluate their perceived costs and benefits of being in the relationship with each other. When the perceived benefits (i.e., learning new skills) outweigh the costs (i.e., investment of time) of being in the relationship, then the relationship will flourish. In turn these perceptions of costs and benefits will continue to impact their episodic interactions and subsequent satisfaction with the relationship as well as their desire to commit to the relationship long term. Eby also suggests that the ability of both mentors and protégés to access other relationship alternatives (i.e., another mentor in the organization) has an important influence on the

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