

The Protege's Perspective Regarding Negative Mentoring Experiences: The Development of a Taxonomy

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A taxonomy of negative mentoring experiences was developed using descriptive accounts of negative mentoring experiences from the protege's perspective. Content analysis revealed 15 types of negative mentoring experiences, nested within five broad metathemes: Match Within the Dyad, Distancing Behavior, Manipulative Behavior, Lack of Mentor Expertise, and General Dysfunctionality. Quantitative analyses indicated that proteges were more likely to report that their mentor had dissimilar attitudes, values, and beliefs when describing their most negative mentoring relationship compared to their most positive mentoring relationship. Implications for theory-building, future research, and applied practice are discussed. © 2000 Academic Press

Obtaining a mentor is an important career development experience for individuals. Research indicates that mentored individuals perform better on the job, advance more rapidly within the organization (i.e., get promoted more quickly and earn higher salaries), report more job and career satisfaction, and express

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lower turnover intentions than their nonmentored counterparts (Chao, 1997; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1989; Scandura, 1992; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1992). Given these findings, it has been recommended that organizations encourage managers to become mentors, set up formal (assigned) mentoring programs, and link mentoring to other human resource management systems such as compensation and performance appraisal to increase mentoring in organizational settings (Burke & McKeen, 1989; Kram, 1985).

Notwithstanding these benefits it is important to recognize that mentoring is an intense interpersonal relationship (Kram, 1985). As such, while a mentor refers to someone who "... advises, counsels, or helps (younger) individuals ..." (Feldman, 1988, p. 129), this does not preclude the possibility that mentoring may have negative aspects (Scandura, 1998). While initially counterintuitive, social-psychological research on interpersonal relationships notes that unpleasant incidents are a common and often neglected aspect of all relationships, ranging from minor episodes, such as arguing, to serious incidents, such as physical or psychological abuse (Duck, 1982, 1994; Levinger, 1983; Marshall, 1994; Wood & Duck, 1995). Duck (1994) makes a strong case that it is naive to adopt "... a totally black-white way of thinking about 'positive' and 'negative' relationships ..." (p. 7) and that researchers should examine both aspects to adequately capture the totality of a relational experience.

Given this large body of social-psychological research, it is interesting that very little research has focused on the negative aspects of mentoring. One exception is Scandura's (1998) recent theoretical article which maps the negative aspects of mentoring relationships on to Duck's (1994) social-psychological typology of the "dark side" of close interpersonal relationships. While Scandura's (1998) work provides an organizing framework for the study of the negative aspects of mentoring, empirical research is needed. A first step toward understanding what Scandura terms "dysfunctional mentoring relationships" (p. 449) is to uncover the different types of negative mentoring experiences that exist, as well as the situations in which these experiences may be most likely to occur. Since no empirical research to date has examined the negative aspects of mentoring, in-depth qualitative accounts of proteges' perceptions of negative mentoring experiences were obtained and an inductively derived taxonomy of negative mentoring experiences was developed based on descriptive accounts of these relationships. Further, quantitative data were used to test some initial hypotheses about situations in which negative mentoring experiences may be most likely to occur.

While the focus of the present study is on negative mentoring experiences it is important to note that we are not suggesting that mentoring relationships can be easily classified as "positive" or "negative" or that the presence of negative events means that the relationship is doomed to fail. Even in healthy relationships negative events occur, and it is important to recognize that negative experiences can range in severity from somewhat minor (e.g., a fleeting disagreement) to quite serious (e.g., revenge, violence) (Duck, 1994; Marshall, 1994; Wood &

Duck, 1995). We expect that some mentoring relationships may be generally beneficial to proteges' career development, while at times marked by experiences that proteges perceive as negative. It was these negative experiences that we were interested in cataloging in an effort to understand this typically neglected aspect of mentor-protege interactions. However, by focusing on proteges' perceptions, some of the experiences that emerge from this study may represent attempts on the part of the mentor to actually help the protege (e.g., increase his or her independence, gain confidence), rather than malicious or intentional actions toward a protege. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that proteges' perceptions of negative experiences are of interest in the current study, not mentors' perceptions of similar events or the overall quality of the mentoring relationship.

In keeping with this objective, negative mentoring experiences were operationalized as *specific incidents* that occur between mentors and proteges, mentors' *characteristic manner of interacting* with proteges, or *mentors' characteristics* that limit their ability to effectively provide guidance to proteges. This tripartite definition of negative mentoring experiences was generated from scattered accounts of the negative aspects of mentoring in the empirical and practitioner literature. For example, there is sketchy evidence that actions on the part of mentors (e.g., Levinson et al., 1978), characteristic patterns of interacting with proteges (e.g., Hurley & Fagenson-Eland, 1996), and personal characteristics of mentors (e.g., Myers & Humphreys, 1985) represent three distinct catalysts of negative mentoring experiences.

The choice to focus on negative mentoring *experiences* in the present study rather than dysfunctional mentoring *relationships* was based on several factors. In order to study dysfunctional mentoring relationships we first need an understanding of the types of negative experiences that proteges encounter. Second, like all interpersonal relationships mentoring is complex and dynamic (Kram, 1985). Thus, it seems premature to embark on a full-scale study of dysfunctional mentoring relationships without an initial understanding of the negative experiences that can occur in mentoring relationships. Finally, both members of a relationship dyad (in this case the mentor and protege) impact the behavioral patterns that unfold, and each member has a somewhat unique perspective on that relationship (Duck, 1994). Thus, it was important to specify which member of the dyad was of the focus of our investigation. Our interest in this study was the protege's negative experiences with his or her mentor since mentoring relationships are unbalanced with respect to power (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989), and the potential for relationship abuse often rests with the individual with greater power (e.g., the mentor) (Ashforth, 1994; Frost, 1987).

DO MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS CONSIST ONLY OF POSITIVE EXPERIENCES?

Mentoring relationships are described as developmental relationships in which a more advanced or experienced person (a mentor) provides career and/or personal support to another individual (a protege) (Kram, 1986). According to

Kram (1985) mentors come in many forms, including supervisors, other higher level organizational members, peers, and individuals in different organizations. Mentors can provide two main sources of support for proteges: instrumental support and psychosocial support (e.g., Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Instrumental support, also referred to as career-related or vocational support, involves those aspects of the relationship that enhance proteges' career advancement. This includes the mentor acting as a sponsor, coach, and protector, in addition to providing exposure, visibility, and challenging job assignments. Psychosocial functions include serving as a role model for proteges and providing counseling, friendship, and advice.

While research illustrates that these positive forms of support occur in many mentoring relationships (e.g., Chao, 1997; Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992), there is some evidence that mentoring can have unhealthy aspects. For instance, some of the earliest research on mentoring by Levinson and colleagues noted that mentoring can be destructive at times, "For example, . . . (a mentor) is so afraid of being eclipsed that he behaves destructively (toward the protege) at crucial moments" (Levinson et al., 1978, p. 100). Levinson et al. (1978) further illustrate that mentors can be excessively critical, demanding, and authoritarian toward proteges and can even exploit or undercut proteges' careers. Kram's (1985) seminal research also documented a relationship which started out as mutually beneficial, but over time became frustrating and eventually destructive. Further, Ragins and Scandura's (1997) recent study of gender differences in the termination of mentoring relationships found evidence of unhealthy relationship dynamics between mentors and proteges. Research on cross-gender mentoring also suggests that it can have negative aspects such as overprotection and paternalism by the mentor and sexual tension between the mentor and protege (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988; Ragins, 1989; Ragins & Cotton, 1991).

While none of these studies were specifically designed to examine negative mentoring, each reached the conclusion that proteges may have negative experiences with mentors. Interestingly, the practitioner literature also notes several potential problems with mentoring, including poorly skilled mentors, mismatches between mentors and proteges, mentors using inappropriate teaching tactics such as embarrassing proteges in front of peers, lording over proteges, and intentionally sabotaging proteges' career development (Darling, 1985; Myers & Humphreys, 1985). Thus, the following question was posed. *Research Question 1*: What percentage of proteges report having at least one negative mentoring experience?

THE NATURE OF NEGATIVE MENTORING EXPERIENCES

Several areas of research may be useful in the effort to understand negative mentoring experiences. This includes Scandura's (1998) integration of the close interpersonal relationships and mentoring literatures, as well as research on interpersonal deviance (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1995) and power and politics (e.g., Frost, 1987; Pfeffer, 1981; Ragins & Sund-

strom, 1989). Relying on a variety of perspectives to frame the current study had several advantages. First, since no empirical research to date has systematically examined negative mentoring experiences, drawing from different theoretical perspectives allowed us to consider a wide range of potentially negative experiences from the protege's perspective. Further, one of the criticisms of qualitative research is the possibility that the researcher's value system, beliefs, and academic interests may unduly influence conclusions drawn from the data (VanMaanen, 1979). Thus, rather than seeking to fit our findings into an existing theoretical framework or typology, we approached the current study from an inductive, exploratory perspective. Third, integrating research from these different perspectives allowed us to look for commonalities among these diverse literatures and set the stage for integrative theory-building (Weick, 1989).

Scandura's (1998) recent theoretical article is a first attempt to explicate the different ways that mentoring relationships may be dysfunctional. By adapting Duck's (1994) typology of the dark side of relational behavior Scandura (1998) presents a 2×2 typology of the forms that dysfunctional mentoring may take, in addition to proposing three additional types of mentoring dysfunctions (submissiveness, harassment, deception). Dysfunctional mentoring is categorized in terms of whether the intentions underlying one's behavior are bad (e.g., sabotaging the protege's career) or good (e.g., the mentor and protege do not work well together due to personal incompatibilities). Slightly modifying Duck's second dimension, Scandura (1998) proposed that dysfunctional mentoring could also be categorized as inherent in the relationship pattern that develops (psycho-social) or an emergent characteristic of the relationship (vocational).

Other areas of research focus on the dark side of workplace behavior. This includes research on deviant interpersonal behaviors, such as sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997), aggressive acts and verbal abuse (Neuman & Baron, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), deception (O'Hair & Cody, 1994), and tyrannical supervisory behavior (Ashforth, 1994). Given the interpersonal nature of these behaviors, some may manifest in mentoring relationships. In fact, of the 45 deviant workplace behaviors identified by Robinson and Bennett (1995), several overlapped with the behaviors noted in descriptive and anecdotal accounts of negative mentoring experiences (e.g., sexual harassment, verbal abuse, blaming others for one's own mistakes, favoritism) (Hurley & Fagenson-Eland, 1996; Myers & Humphreys, 1985). Further, Neuman and Baron's (1998) model of workplace aggression contains several behaviors that are also noted in the mentoring literature (e.g., belittling, sabotage) (Myers & Humphreys, 1985; Scandura, 1998).

Research on organizational power provides additional insight into the types of negative mentoring experiences proteges may report (Frost, 1987; Pfeffer, 1981). Of particular interest are the power issues associated with interpersonal relationships; more specifically, the power differential between a mentor and protege (Ragins, 1997b; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). By virtue of his or her gatekeeper status, a mentor has access to resources that a protege desires, including access

to challenging job assignments, organizational information, and career guidance (Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1997b; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). Ragins and colleagues (Ragins, 1997a, 1997b; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989) discuss this power differential, yet highlight the potentially positive aspects of the mentor's power bases (e.g., helping the protege in his or her career). However, this power imbalance may also set the stage for negative mentor behavior such as overworking the protege and taking credit for the protege's accomplishments.

Another manifestation of power is politicking behavior on the part of the mentor (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Frost, 1987). Politicking includes behavior designed to maximize personal short-term or long-term gain and includes actions such as ingratiation and self-promotion (Ferris et al., 1989). By engaging in political behavior mentors might intentionally or inadvertently influence the quality of the mentor-protege relationship. For instance, the mentor may spend so much time engaging in self-promotion and impression management that he or she has little time to provide essential mentoring functions to the protege. In other situations the protege may become involved in the mentor's political maneuvering, which in turn may have a negative effect on the protege (e.g., guilt by association).

Taken together, there are several possible themes that may underlie negative mentoring experiences. While we expect to find negative mentoring experiences that are congruent with some of the themes identified above, since no systematic research exists on this topic we took an inductively oriented approach and proposed the following research question. *Research Question 2*: What are the categories that best describe the negative mentoring experiences reported by proteges?

SITUATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH NEGATIVE MENTORING EXPERIENCES

To more fully understand negative mentoring experiences, it is important to examine the circumstances in which it may be likely to occur. Research on interpersonal attraction and similarity (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989) and diverse mentoring relationships (e.g., Ragins, 1997a, 1997b) suggests three such circumstances: (a) the mentor and protege have dissimilar backgrounds, (b) the mentor and protege are dissimilar in terms of attitudes, values, and beliefs, and (c) the protege has a direct reporting relationship with the mentor. While certainly not exhaustive of all the situations that may promote negative mentoring experiences, examining these circumstances may provide an initial glimpse into when and why negative mentoring experiences occur.

Perceived and actual similarity affects perceptions of shared identity and liking among two individuals (Byrne, 1971; Ragins, 1997a, 1997b). In turn, liking affects the quality of work-related dyadic relationships, such as leader-member exchange (e.g., Engle & Lord, 1997; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993). Further, leader-member exchange has been related to mentoring relationships both theoretically (McManus & Russell, 1997; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997) and empirically

(Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994). Consistent with this literature empirical research indicates that as perceived or actual mentor–protege similarity increases, so does the amount of mentoring received (Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1993; Dreher & Dougherty, 1997; Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1998; Thomas, 1990). Thus, it is proposed that *Hypothesis 1*: Proteges will be more likely to report that their mentor had a dissimilar background when describing their most negative mentoring experience compared to their most positive mentoring experience. *Hypothesis 2*: Proteges will be more likely to report that their mentor had dissimilar attitudes, values, and beliefs when describing their most negative mentoring experience compared to their most positive mentoring experience.

Whether the protege has a direct reporting relationship with the mentor may also be important. On one hand, if the mentor is a supervisor this may increase contact between mentor and protege, and in turn augment the amount of mentoring received. Several studies have found such an effect (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Conversely, the presence of a direct reporting relationship may exacerbate the potential for abuse (Scandura, 1998). For example, with more frequent contact, the mentor may be more likely to include the protege in his or her politicking activities. Sustained, daily contact between the mentor and protege could also exacerbate an already strained relationship or create conditions that are conducive to excessive monitoring (Ashforth, 1994). Further, supervisory mentors have control over proteges' pay raises, performance evaluation ratings, and job assignments, and these additional power bases may set the stage for exploitation of a subordinate protege (Ashforth, 1994). Thus, while the supporting evidence is somewhat mixed it is proposed that *Hypothesis 3*: Proteges will be more likely to report that their mentor was a supervisor when describing their most negative mentoring experience compared to their most positive mentoring experience.

METHOD

Procedure and Study Participants

Surveys were administered in two executive development programs conducted at a large southeastern university as part of a 360° feedback process for program participants. The feedback process was designed to provide program participants with data regarding various managerial skills for which they could then set improvement goals. As such, each program participant was given a survey packet containing a survey to complete themselves, as well as 10 surveys to be distributed to their subordinates, peers, and higher level managers. The areas covered in the feedback portion of the survey included feedback style, team building, customer orientation, participative management, innovation, transformational leadership, delegation, coaching, social bases of power (leader tactics), and organizational citizenship behaviors. The questions related to positive and negative mentoring experiences were placed at the end of the survey, with the

explanation that understanding what behaviors are associated with positive and negative mentoring experiences would facilitate the presentation of mentoring/leadership topics in subsequent classes. It was clearly stated that this information on mentoring was *not* related to the program participant's mentoring skills and that they were to think about a personal current or previous mentoring relationship (described in more detail below). Surveys were completed on the respondents' own time and were returned to the researchers in prepaid envelopes to ensure confidentiality.

Of the 429 surveys initially distributed, 277 were completed and returned, yielding a 65% response rate. This response rate is a conservative (deflated) estimate since it is unknown how many respondents did not distribute surveys to peers, supervisors, and subordinates. Based on the returned replies, the average number of respondents associated with each participant in the executive development program was 6.88 ($SD = 2.29$). Sixty-five percent of these respondents were employed in the private sector, 40% in manufacturing, and 25% in service organizations. The remaining 35% of the total sample were employed in government agencies. Participants were generally members of upper level management (78%), including top managerial positions, such as CEO, CFO, COO, as well as vice presidents, directors, and division leaders. Seventy-three percent of the respondents were either the participants in the executive development program or their peers or higher level managers, with the remaining respondents (27%) being subordinates of the participants.

Of those returning surveys 156 (56%) had experience as a protege. A mentoring relationship was defined on the survey as: "A developmental relationship in which a more advanced or experienced person (the mentor) is committed to providing career and/or personal support to another individual (the protege). A mentor may be a person's supervisor, other organizational superior, peer, or an individual in a different organization" (Kram, 1986). Proteges reported an average of 3.4 ($SD = 1.9$, range 1–10) mentors over the course of their careers. With regard to the gender composition of mentor–protege dyads, 80% were same-sex relationships (93% male–male, 7% female–female). Of the remaining (cross-sex) relationships, 94% consisted of male mentors and female proteges.

Measures

After reading the definition of a mentoring relationship provided above, individuals were instructed to skip the section on mentoring if they had never had a mentor or to continue on if they had ever had a mentor. The section on mentoring contained two subsections designed to obtain information on the respondent's most negative and most positive mentoring relationship. The quantitative data asked respondents to think of their most negative relationship with a specific mentor and to describe several characteristics of that relationship. The first set of questions included two *perceived similarity* measures ["How similar in terms of background (e.g., education, experience, etc.) did you feel your mentor was to you at the beginning of your relationship?" and "When your

relationship began, how similar were your mentor's attitudes, beliefs, and values to yours?"]. Response options for both similarity measures were: 1, very dissimilar; 2, somewhat dissimilar; 3, somewhat similar; and 4, very similar. Indices of similarity were created for each question such that response options 1 and 2 were combined to create a "dissimilar" category and response options 3 and 4 were combined to create a "similar" category. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the level in the organization their mentor held. Response options included peer, immediate boss, one level above (not boss), two levels above, and other. The response option immediate boss was categorized as *supervisor mentor* and all other response options were categorized as *non-supervisor mentor*.

After providing information on the characteristics of the mentoring relationship, the qualitative data were obtained by asking respondents the following: "Please describe what it was about this mentoring relationship that made it so *negative* for you. Please provide as many *specific examples* as possible of things your mentor did, qualities of your mentor, ways you interacted, or key situations that made the relationship not work well for you." Respondents were provided with plenty of space to elaborate on their negative mentoring relationship. From these open-ended responses, specific negative mentoring experiences were captured.

In a second subsection, respondents were asked to focus on their *most positive* relationship with a specific mentor. Based on this frame of reference, respondents answered the same set of questions about the characteristics of this mentoring relationship (e.g., perceived background similarity). Respondents were then asked describe their most positive mentoring relationship. An open-ended question was presented which was worded identically to the above question, except that the descriptor *negative* was changed to *positive*, and "not work well for you" was changed to "work well for you." While the open-ended descriptions of the most positive mentoring relationship were not of interest in the present study, we obtained these accounts so that the questioning was not perceived by the respondents as heavily weighted toward negative mentoring experiences.

Content Analysis Process

The purpose of the content analysis was to categorize the types of negative mentoring experiences reported by proteges. Three of the authors participated in the content analysis. First, respondents' accounts of their most negative mentoring experiences were transcribed verbatim by one of the authors. Next, two of the authors were trained on content analysis techniques by the senior author for about 15 h over a 2-week period (e.g., self-study, practice coding behaviors, discussion) using Weber's (1990) and Krippendorff's (1980) texts on content analysis as a guide.

Coding taxonomy. The first step of the content analysis required the development of the coding taxonomy. Each researcher reviewed the negative mentoring experiences provided by proteges and generated possible categories to capture the meaning reflected in similar groups of comments. After each researcher

generated a list of possible categories, they shared their lists. Similarities among the independently generated categories were noted, and after several iterations, consensus was reached on the final categories. Next, 15 sample negative mentoring experiences were written by the researchers and content analyzed using the coding categories. Through this process discrepancies in theme definitions were resolved and slight modifications were made to the coding taxonomy (e.g., clarifying category labels and sample behaviors used to facilitate categorization). With the taxonomy in place, the researchers clustered (Hycner, 1985) categories into higher level themes and metathemes (see Allen, Burroughs, & Poteet, 1997). As a final check on the coding taxonomy, a professor who was not associated with the study reclassified the themes and subthemes into the appropriate metatheme with 87% accuracy.

Coding negative mentoring experiences. The next step in the content analysis process was the classification of the actual protege experiences. Each transcribed response describing a negative mentoring relationship was carefully reviewed by one of the researchers and specific experiences were coded into one of the categories in the coding taxonomy. Next, a second researcher independently recategorized these experiences. If there was a disagreement on the classification of a negative mentoring experience, the researchers discussed the rationale for their classification and a decision was made regarding the appropriate categorization. Interrater agreement between the two researchers' ratings was assessed, with an overall hit rate (percentage of agreement). The overall hit rate was 87%, with agreement reaching 100% for the last few consensus sessions.

RESULTS

Of the 156 proteges in the current study, all reported at least one positive mentoring relationship and 84 reported at least one negative mentoring relationship. Of these 240 mentoring relationships (156 positive and 84 negative), 26 (11%) involved formal pairings and 155 (66%) were relationships with supervisors. In response to the first research question, 54% of those mentored reported being in at least one negative mentoring relationship. Many of the 84 proteges described several experiences related to the same negative mentoring relationship ($M = 2.0$; $SD = 1.4$; range, 1–9), yielding a total of 168 distinct or mutually exclusive negative experiences. Eighty-five percent of these negative experiences occurred in same-sex relationships. Of the remaining 15% cross-sex relationships, only one involved a female mentor and a male protege.

The content analysis procedure yielded five broad categories or metathemes of negative mentoring experiences: Match within the Dyad ($n = 46$), Distancing Behavior ($n = 41$), Manipulative Behavior ($n = 39$), Lack of Mentor Expertise ($n = 29$), and General Dysfunctionality ($n = 13$) (see Table 1). Within each meta-theme, distinct themes emerged representing more specific experiences (see Table 1). For some of these themes it was possible to further classify experiences into subthemes (see Table 1). This allowed for a more fine-grained understanding of negative mentoring experiences as described by proteges. Following conven-

tional guidelines for content analysis, the experiences were categorized into the lowest (most specific) category within each metatheme (Weber, 1990). It should be noted that while one protege might have provided a description of multiple experiences associated with the same mentor, each aspect of the negative experience was classified into one and only one category.

Table 1 also provides the prevalence of each experience within each metatheme, theme, and (where appropriate) subtheme. The frequency and percentages shown in Table 1 reflect the number of times each type of experience was classified into a particular category, based on the total number of negative experiences ($N = 168$). Consistent with content analysis procedures (Krippendorff, 1980), each specific negative experience was classified into only one category. Sample experiences as reported by proteges are also provided (see Table 1). As is noted in Table 1, the most frequent metatheme was Match within the Dyad followed closely by Distancing Behavior. At the theme level the most frequently reported experiences involved mentor neglect (Neglect, $n = 26$), the mentor lacking interpersonal skills (Interpersonal Incompetencies, $n = 22$), mentor abuse of power (Tyranny, $n = 20$), and the mentor having values (Values, $n = 18$) and work habits (Work-style, $n = 17$) that were incompatible with those of the protege. These results answer Research Question 2 regarding the themes that best describe negative mentoring experiences from the protege's perspective.

To test Hypotheses 1–3 regarding circumstances associated with the most negative mentoring experience reported, χ^2 tests were conducted comparing the frequency of proteges' most positive and most negative mentoring experience across each variable of interest. Each χ^2 test consisted of a 2×2 comparison (e.g., most positive experience–most negative experience by dissimilar background–similar background). No support was found for Hypothesis 1. Ninety-five of the 155 proteges who had positive mentoring experiences (61%) reported similar background characteristics to their mentor and 44 of the 84 proteges (53%) who had negative experiences reported such similarity when describing their most negative mentoring experience ($\chi^2_{(1)} = .77$, n.s.). In contrast, Hypothesis 2 was supported. One hundred and twenty-eight (83%) of those who had positive mentoring experiences reported having similar attitudes, values, and beliefs to those of their mentor, compared to 47 (57%) of those who reported negative mentoring experiences ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 18.58$, $p < .001$). Finally, Hypothesis 3 was not supported; there was no significant difference in the base rate of the most positive ($N = 98$, 66%) and most negative ($N = 57$, 71%) mentoring experience when the mentor was a supervisor ($\chi^2_{(1)} = .24$, n.s.).

DISCUSSION

The current study was designed to understand proteges' perceptions of negative mentoring experiences. While Scandura (1998) suggested that this phenomenon is likely to have a low base rate, over half of the proteges in this sample of managers and professionals reported being in at least one negative mentoring relationship during their careers. Further, proteges in this sample had a variety of

TABLE 1
Results of the Content Analysis

Category	Prevalence	Sample comments
Match within the Dyad (<i>N</i> = 46)		
Values	18 (11%)	<p>“... He also did not value differences in people and had trouble getting past some narrow-minded ideals (prejudices).”</p> <p>“... This person would often compromise the quality of products to the customer at my objection.”</p> <p>“... He was driven to build empires, which was not a match to my philosophy.”</p>
Work-style	17 (10%)	<p>“This mentor was reactive, not proactive. Even though there were times I attempted to be proactive about the situation, he was often not.”</p> <p>“Very different views about what successful management looks like.”</p> <p>“... So conservative it's difficult to grow or try new approaches. This is frustrating and tends to keep one from even trying.”</p>
Personality	11 (07%)	<p>“The reason I see this as negative was our dissimilar personalities and habits.”</p> <p>“Our personalities were very different.”</p>
Distancing Behavior (<i>N</i> = 41)		
Neglect	26 (16%)	<p>“He didn't seem interested in my specific career path or providing me with information to help me further my career.”</p> <p>“Little or no feedback.”</p> <p>“He was always very evasive when I needed his advice or support.”</p>
Self-absorption	10 (06%)	<p>“Mentor was excessively focused on his own career.”</p> <p>“Mentor's actions were self-serving . . .”</p>
Intentional exclusion	05 (03%)	<p>“This person was a ‘closed door’ individual that did not believe in seeking or speaking to employees on the production floor.”</p> <p>“Mentor played favorites . . . and ignored others. Those on the outside were only treated as resources and not treated as part of the inner circle.”</p>
Manipulative Behavior (<i>N</i> = 39)		
Position power	24 (14%)	
Tyranny	20 (12%)	<p>“Used his position of authority to put me and others down.”</p> <p>“This manager was from the old school of managing by intimidation.”</p> <p>“... Never hesitated to pull rank to get what he wanted.”</p>
Inappropriate delegation	04 (02%)	<p>“She has problems giving up all the jobs she has even though she has good workers.”</p> <p>“He would often give others assignments he should have done himself.”</p>

TABLE 1—Continued

Category	Prevalence	Sample comments
Politicking	15 (09%)	
Sabotage	06 (04%)	"... He gave me a failing evaluation because I went to a medical school that he was in disfavor with." "She started expressing such a negative way about me with the plant manager behind my back. She actually would do things wrong and blamed me without me knowing."
Credit-taking	05 (03%)	"He took credit for all good things and gave credit to his management staff for all bad things." "... My mentor was using my ideas in other forums and calling them his own."
Deception	04 (02%)	"I discovered on several occasions that my mentor had lied to me and could not be trusted." "... Not always truthful."
Lack of Mentor Expertise (<i>N</i> = 29)		
Interpersonal incompetency	22 (13%)	"Someone who does not communicate well at all." "Lack of sensitivity." "He was difficult to talk to."
Technical incompetency	07 (04%)	"The first question he ever posed to me was 'What is this balance sheet thing? It looks like a waste of time.' "... Not familiar with engineering disciplines."
General Dysfunctionality (<i>N</i> = 13)		
Bad attitude	09 (05%)	"Mentor had a negative attitude." "A lot of our energy was wasted by spending time being critical of what others were or were not doing, all of the problems with the way things were being done."
Personal problems	04 (02%)	"Allowed drinking to interfere with work." "Mentor had personal and family problems outside of work."

Note. Metathemes are the first level of headings, with the number in parentheses indicating the number of experiences represented in each metatheme, themes are second level headings, and subthemes are third level headings. Numbers corresponding to themes and subthemes indicate the frequency and percentage of each type of negative experience based on the total number of negative experiences reported (*N* = 168).

negative mentoring experiences—from mentor self-absorption to neglect, to incompatibility, to sabotage and deception. These findings coincide with what social psychologists have been lamenting for some time. More specifically, that the almost exclusive focus on the positive aspects of relationships paints a distorted and unrealistic picture of relational patterns and fosters the perception that any negative experience is pathological and aberrant rather than a normal aspect of relationships (Duck, 1994; Levinger, 1983; Wood & Duck, 1995). The

present study extends this line of thinking to the mentoring domain by suggesting that current conceptualizations of mentoring may be too narrowly focused on the positive aspects of the relationship rather than considering the full scope of experiences, both positive and negative, that are likely to occur.

We also found that negative mentoring experiences among proteges in this sample were particularly likely to occur when the protege perceived the mentor as having dissimilar attitudes, values, and beliefs. In contrast, neither background dissimilarity nor having a mentor who was also one's supervisor was related to the incidence of negative mentoring experiences. This suggests that the nature of the perceived dissimilarity between the mentor and protege may be important to consider in understanding negative mentoring experiences. Alternatively, since perceived similarity in attitudes, values, and beliefs is more subjective than background characteristics, perhaps proteges were justifying why a particular mentoring relationship may have been less than ideal rather than accurately reporting differences between themselves and their mentor. Since we are not able to determine which of these two explanations most accurately represents our findings, future research may want to obtain information on both mentors' and proteges' attitude, value, and belief similarity rather than relying on one person's perception. Likewise, it may be useful to examine perceived similarity at different points in time to see if experiences in the relationship, whether positive or negative, impact similarity perceptions.

The inductively derived taxonomy in Table 1 provides confirmation of some negative mentor behaviors that practitioners have warned against and mentoring researchers have alluded to, as well as some interesting departures. Researchers studying both mentoring (Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978; Scandura, 1998) and workplace deviance (Neuman & Baron, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1995) have discussed exploitative, authoritarian behavior, along with actions aimed at undercutting someone else's career as types of antisocial workplace conduct. Our research supports these concerns, with 21% of the experiences described by proteges including inappropriate delegation, tyranny, credit-taking, or sabotage. It is also interesting that this metatheme of Manipulative Behaviors was the most well differentiated (i.e., greatest level of specificity) and contained the most stereotypical examples of the potential problems associated with mentoring (Myers & Humphreys, 1985).

Poor interpersonal skills on the part of the mentor have also been described in both the practitioner (Myers & Humphreys, 1985) and academic (Scandura, 1998) literature. Support was found for this type of negative mentoring experience; 17% of the negative experiences reported by proteges were related to mentor competency issues (see Table 1, Lack of Mentor Expertise). Further, concerns raised regarding mentor-protege fit (Kram, 1985; Myers & Humphreys, 1985; Scandura, 1998) were supported in the current study in that mismatches in values, personality, or work-styles accounted for 28% of the negative experiences reported. Taken with the finding that proteges' most negative mentoring experiences were more likely to be characterized by dissimilarity between

themselves and their mentor in terms of attitudes, beliefs, and values, the importance of interpersonal compatibility in mentor–protege dyads is clear. In contrast, very little support was found for several negative aspects of mentoring relationships that have been referred to in the literature, such as overprotection, paternalism, sexual harassment, or sexual encounters (Kram, 1986; Noe, 1988; Ragins, 1989; Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Scandura, 1998). This very low base rate of sexual encounters and lack of evidence for sexual harassment may be due to several factors, including the small number of cross-gender relationships reported by those with negative experiences ($n = 19$, 23%) and perhaps respondents' unwillingness to disclose such information.

Finally, the proteges in this sample reported that Distancing Behavior, a virtually unexamined type of mentor behavior, occurred quite frequently. In fact, mentor neglect was the single most frequently reported negative experience among these proteges, capturing 16% of all negative experiences reported and being noted as a problem by 26 of the 86 proteges (30%). On one hand this is an encouraging finding since mentor neglect is relatively minor compared to the other experiences reported by proteges. However, mentor neglect may have substantial long-term consequences given research indicating that the lack of mentoring is associated with slower promotion rates and salary increases (Scandura, 1992; Whitely et al., 1992). This finding is also interesting given that this sample of proteges was reporting on what they believed to be a mentoring relationship, yet they indicated that their mentors had neglected them. Does this suggest that while some mentoring was received, it did not meet proteges' expectations? Or do proteges report neglect if the mentor is not accessible at a critical time, or does this reflect a pattern of neglect within the relationship? Clearly, additional research is warranted and could be informed by research on mentors' differing motives for engaging in mentoring (Allen et al., 1997) and the perceived costs and benefits of mentoring (Ragins & Scandura, 1993).

Implications for Future Research

One of the most pressing issues is the development of measurement systems to assess negative mentoring experiences. This could include a checklist-type instrument listing short descriptions of negative mentoring experiences, multi-item Likert-type scales which tap different experience domains, or open-ended questions with a detailed scoring template. To help ensure content-related validity, researchers are also advised to include additional types of negative experiences that may be germane to the population they are studying. For example, a researcher interested in studying negative mentoring experiences in a military environment may want to include verbal abuse or sexual harassment as additional types of negative mentoring experiences.

Research is also needed which examines characteristics of mentors and proteges who are susceptible to negative mentoring experiences. However, such research efforts should carefully consider the wide range of negative experiences found in the present study since their antecedents may vary based on the type of

experience. For instance, mentors with a high need for power may be particularly likely to engage in manipulative behavior, whereas mentors who are low on altruism or sociability may be more likely to engage in distancing behaviors. Exploring the effect of negative mentoring experiences with job-related (e.g., turnover intentions), psychological (e.g., stress), and career-related (e.g., promotion rates) outcomes is also important in order to ascertain how these experiences impact proteges. Finally, research is needed which examines the negative aspects of mentoring from the mentor's perspective. This information is important to provide a more complete view of mentoring relationships.

Finally, research on negative mentoring experiences could be informed by research and theory on mentoring stages. Mentoring relationships appear to progress through relatively well-defined and time-marked phases, including initiation (0 to 1 year), cultivation (2 to 5 years), separation (after about 2 to 5 years), and redefinition (several years after separation) (Chao, 1997; Kram, 1983, 1985). These phases are characterized by specific relational patterns and turning points, some of which parallel our findings. For instance, in the initiation stage both parties set expectations and the relationship gains importance to each member (Kram, 1985). Thus, it seems unlikely that negative experiences would take place here, or else the relationship would probably terminate prematurely or not develop into a mentorship. In the next phase (cultivation) negative experiences may begin to occur as interactions between the mentor and protege become more frequent and intense (Kram, 1985). For instance, perceived mismatches in terms of values, work-style, or personality may surface during the early part of the cultivation phase. Likewise, with sustained interaction with mentors, proteges may perceive interpersonal or technical incompetencies. Later in the cultivation phase proteges often gain a sense of self-worth and mastery (Kram, 1985) which may be threatening to some mentors and lead to negative experiences, such as tyranny or sabotage. In fact, both Kram (1983, 1985) and Levinson et al. (1978) describe instances where a mentor becomes resentful, challenged, or threatened by a protege.

There are several ways in which the negative experiences described in this study may be related to the termination phase of mentoring relationships. For example, negative experiences such as distancing behavior on the part of the mentor may reflect the natural progression of events in the separation phase where a mentor tries to increase the protege's autonomy and independence (Kram, 1985). Or, consistent with research on relationship loss (e.g., Duck, 1982, 1984; Graziano & Musser, 1982; Levinger, 1983), negative events may be catalysts of the dissolution of mentoring relationships. Supporting this idea is Ragins and Scandura's (1997) finding that some mentoring relationships terminated for reasons similar to those in the present study (e.g., preventing the protege's advancement, destructive relationship, excessive mentor control). This suggests that some negative experiences might lead to the premature separation of a mentoring relationship. In summary, given the analogues to the mentoring

phase and relational loss literatures, future research is needed that examines negative mentoring experiences in the context of relationship phases.

Implications for Practice

The results of the current study have numerous implications for practice. In terms of screening potential mentors, organizations should be aware of the different motives individuals may have for becoming mentors (Allen et al., 1997). Given the current study's findings, some mentors may engage in mentoring as a way to wield power over proteges, delegate undesirable work, or cover up their own shortcomings. Further, given the high rate of distancing behavior, some mentors may have little interest in mentoring and/or lack the technical or interpersonal skills to be effective mentors. This suggests that only those who are truly interested in developing others should be encouraged to become mentors (Kram, 1986) and other opportunities (e.g., task force activities, community service projects) should be offered to those who lack this interest to reduce the pressure to become a mentor.

The current study also demonstrates that once potential mentors are identified, steps should be taken to help ensure a good match between mentor and protege. This could be facilitated by providing opportunities for potential mentors and proteges to interact informally before committing to a mentor–protege relationship. It is also advised that organizations monitor the performance of mentors and evaluate the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs. Survey feedback and upward appraisal systems are two ways to monitor mentoring relationships once they have been formed. In addition, proteges should be informed about the pitfalls associated with relying too heavily on their mentor to fulfill important psychosocial and career-related functions and be encouraged to establish mentoring relationships with a variety of individuals within, as well as outside, the organization (Eby, 1997; Kram, 1985).

Limitations and Conclusions

Several limitations of the present study should be noted. While the sample represents individuals from a variety of organizations and functional areas, generalizability may be constrained since the data were collected from a modestly sized sample of individuals participating in one of two management development programs. As such, caution should be exerted in interpreting our findings and generalizations beyond similar types of individuals is not warranted without independent replication work. In addition, respondents were asked to provide experiences related to their most negative mentoring relationship. Using this strategy helped focus respondents' attention on a particularly salient negative mentoring relationship but did not allow them to report on other, perhaps less severe, experiences. Respondents were also primarily white males in professional jobs with male mentors. Researchers have discussed the unique mentoring-related issues facing individuals from diverse racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Ragins, 1997a, 1997b), as well as women (e.g., Noe, 1988; Ragins, 1989),

suggesting that additional research using more diverse samples is needed. Another important sample for future research is individuals pursuing professional and advanced degrees (e.g., graduate students, interns) since mentors in institutions of higher education are very influential in proteges' career development and are important gatekeepers for limited resources (e.g., financial support, internships, fellowships).

Related to the research methodology, we chose to obtain narrative self-report accounts of negative mentoring experiences. While this provided a rich database to draw upon and allowed the flexibility to obtain a large sample size of negative experiences, it raises several issues. First, some of the experiences that were cataloged came from one subject's description of a single mentor. As such, some of the respondents' mentoring experiences were weighted more heavily depending on the extensiveness of their description. While this is not uncommon in content analysis and it does not violate any assumptions of this methodology (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990) this aspect of data analysis should be noted since it places some boundaries on how the obtained data can be interpreted. Specifically, since each aspect of a negative mentoring experience was categorized into one mutually exclusive theme or subtheme we are unable to ascertain complex patterns of negative mentor behavior. This is an important avenue for future research since it seems likely that some of the negative experiences reported in Table 1 may reflect broader patterns of mentor behavior or even cause-and-effect relationships.

Also related to the mode of data collection is the fact that we were not able to ask follow-up questions of respondents. Given the complex nature of the topic and the diversity of experiences reported, the use of a structured interview would have been a nice supplemental data collection technique. A related limitation is that we do not know the veracity of proteges' reported experiences. While the instructions asked for specific mentoring experiences, it is possible that some proteges provided their own interpretation of an event rather than recording the event as it actually occurred. To help mitigate this problem, information reported by proteges was not coded unless it referred to specific actions or behaviors on the part of the mentor. Also related to data collection are the measures of dissimilarity used in the present study. The two measures are limited in that they are global, single-item measures which relied on a retrospective assessment of similarity.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the current study provides a first glimpse at negative mentoring experiences from the protege's perspective. The results suggest that negative mentoring experiences can take a variety of forms which range in severity. Over half of the sample indicated that they had been in at least one negative mentoring relationship, suggesting that additional research on this topic is needed. This seems particularly important given the widespread use of mentoring programs in today's organizations and the general belief that mentoring is associated with a wide variety of positive outcomes for proteges. While we do not deny that there are positive outcomes associated with many mentoring

relationships, the results of the current study suggest that a more balanced perspective is warranted to advance research and practice on workplace mentoring.

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