# The protégé's role in negative mentoring experiences☆

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## Abstract

Negative experiences were obtained from mentors to identify the role played by protégés in creating difficulties within mentoring relationships. Content analysis revealed a wide range of examples, many of which were consistent with theory and research on dysfunctional mentoring and interpersonal relationships. The findings also indicated that the how typical the negative experience was related positively to its perceived impact on the relationship. Further, as the perceived impact of the experience increased, relationship satisfaction decreased. The results are discussed in terms of future research, mentoring theory, and applied practice.
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## 1. Introduction

Research on organizational mentoring typically focuses on the benefits for protégés and, to a lesser extent, for mentors and organizations. For instance, a recent meta-analysis indicates that mentoring is related to positive job attitudes for

protégés, as well subjective and objective indicators of career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, in press). Mentors report benefits as well, including better support networks, satisfaction from helping others grow and succeed, and access to information that facilitates job performance (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). Organizations may also benefit since mentoring is related to lower protégé intentions to turnover (Allen et al., in press).

While studying benefits of mentoring has demonstrated the importance of these relationships, little research has addressed the long-held contention that mentorships are susceptible to problems (Kram, 1985; Levinson, Darrow, Levinson, Klein, & McKee, 1978). Two recent theoretical papers discuss dysfunctional mentoring and suggest ideas for future research (Feldman, 1999; Scandura, 1998) and two empirical studies examine protégés' reports of negative experiences with mentors (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Eby & Allen, 2002). While these represent important extensions of the mentoring literature, many questions remain. Further, existing research examines relational problems from the perspective of the protégé. Feldman (1999) notes: "As a counterweight to the 'protégé as victim' model, more empirical research is needed on toxic protégés... Which behaviors do protégés engage in to bring upon the wrath or displeasure of their mentors?... perhaps the greatest need in future empirical research is data from the mentors themselves..." (p. 274). Further, discussions of relational problems tend to make the distinction between functional versus dysfunctional mentoring, rather than recognizing that mentoring is likely to be marked by both positive and negative experiences over time. However, recent work by Ragins, Cotton, and Miller's (2000) on "marginal mentoring" (p.1190) suggests that it is important to conceptualize mentoring difficulty as existing on a continuum where some relationships are marginally effective, some are ineffective, and others are truly dysfunctional.

The present study adopts such an approach and pursues two objectives. First, a continuum of relational problems from the mentor's perspective is proposed and examples of negative experiences with protégés are mapped on to this continuum. Second, the current study explores how both the reported typicality of the overall negative experience with a protégé, as well as its perceived impact on the relationship as whole, is related to relationship quality.

## 2. The mentor's perspective on relational problems

Although Kram (1985) emphasizes the role of both mentors and protégés in creating a high or low quality relationship, protégé contributions have received little attention in general, and practically none with respect to problems in mentoring relationships [but see Feldman (1999), for a theoretical treatment of this issue]. Despite this, several lines of research support the notion that protégés may be perceived by mentors as creating or contributing to relational problems, despite their lesser power in the relationship (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989).

Research on interpersonal relationships discusses a variety of behaviors that either member may engage in that can lead to relational problems, such as fights

and conflicts, jealousy, possessiveness, sabotage, selfishness, and deception, among others (Duck, 1982; Marshall, 1994). The mentoring literature also outlines negative experiences that mentors might have with protégés, including acts of betrayal, protégé opportunism, having a protégé who is a bad reflection on oneself, and dysfunctional relationship dynamics (Halatin & Knotts, 1982; Ragins & Scandura, 1997, 1999). Finally, Scandura (1998) provides a theoretical discussion of the various dysfunctions that may occur between mentor and protégé.

## 3. A continuum of relational problems from the Mentor's perspective

Social-psychological research discusses the importance of viewing relational problems as existing on a continuum (Sprecher, 1992; Wood & Duck, 1995). We propose that dysfunctional relationships are on one end of this continuum. These relationships are marked by serious problems where one or both individuals express bad intent toward the other and the consequences are personally and/or professionally damaging (Scandura, 1998). On the other end of the continuum are marginally effective relationships. In these relationships there are problems that minimize the potential of the relationship to meet important needs, but there is no malice involved and the relationship is likely to remain intact. In the middle of the proposed continuum are ineffective relationships. These relationships are marked by problems relating to one another which can lead to the premature termination of a relationship or feelings of disappointment or regret (Scandura, 1998). However, ineffective relationships are distinct from dysfunctional ones because there is no bad intent expressed and they do not seriously damage the mentor or protégé.

The idea of a mentoring relationship continuum has been discussed by both Kram (1985) and Levinson et al. (1978). In conceptualizing such a continuum, it is important to identify examples of negative experiences that mark marginally effective, ineffective, and dysfunctional relationships. Scandura (1998) outlined seven specific dysfunctions that may occur in mentoring relationships and this serves as a point of departure for the present study. Scandura also discusses whether good or bad intent underlies each dysfunction, which helps us place each on the proposed continuum (see Fig. 1).

Since Scandura (1998) does not always differentiate the mentor's versus protégé's role in creating relational problems, we provide a critical discussion of each dysfunction as it relates to protégé behavior. Making this distinction is important because

**Dysfunctional Relationship Experiences  -  Ineffective Relationship Experiences  -  Marginally Effective Relationship Experiences**

| Negative relations | Difficulty | Performance below expectations |
| Malevolent deception | Spoiling | Unwillingness to learn |
| Sabotage | Benign deception | |
| Harassment | Submissiveness | |

Fig. 1. Continuum of relationship problems with protégés.

protégés have less power than mentors (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989), which affects the types of dysfunctional behaviors protégés are likely to engage in. Second, the nature of a mentoring relationship is different for mentors and protégés since the basic function of such a relationship is to facilitate protégé career advancement (Kram, 1985). As such, the extent to which relational dysfunctions violate the core expectations of the relationship differ for mentors and protégés.

## 3.1. Dysfunctional relationship experiences

While probably a low base rate phenomenon (Ragins et al., 2000; Scandura, 1998) dysfunctional mentoring relationships are reported in both the empirical (Eby et al., 2000; Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978; Ragins & Scandura, 1997) and practitioner (Kizilos, 1990; Myers & Humphreys, 1985) literature. This type of relationship is characterized by malice or bad intent and includes the problems of negative relations, malevolent deception, sabotage, and harassment. Negative relations refer to situations marked by bullying, exploitation, or egocentric behavior, with the intent to harm the other person, and it is discussed as a serious form of relational dysfunction (Scandura, 1998). Due to their greater power in the relationship, it seems unlikely that mentors will report tyrannical protégé behavior. However, some protégés might exploit the relationship at the expense of the mentor, or perhaps others in the organization. For instance, a protégé might be motivated to obtain mentoring not simply to advance his or her career, but to actively thwart another individual's chance of receiving mentoring assistance. Likewise, some protégés may engage in self-serving behaviors or act egomaniacally which can breed resentment, or even hatred, toward a protégé. Scandura (1998) also discusses deception as a relationship dysfunction. However, since deception can take both malevolent and benign forms, it is important to differentiate the two. Malevolent deception is aimed at harming another and is typically motivated by revenge, vindication, and hate (O'Hair & Cody, 1994). As such, it represents a serious type of relationship dysfunction. Benign deception does not involve bad intentions toward another person and often involves self-enhancement efforts (O'Hair & Cody, 1994).

Sabotage involves an act of revenge aimed at harming someone. It can be active (e.g., badmouthing a mentor to others) or passive (e.g., giving one's mentor the "silent treatment"). Either way, the intent is to harm the other person (Scandura, 1998). Protégés are likely to use passive or indirect methods of sabotage since they typically do not have direct control over valued resources such as promotions and job assignments. Nonetheless, such sabotage can damage a mentor's reputation or cast doubt on the mentor's ability, which can harm the mentor personally or professionally. Harassment is also a "serious dysfunction in mentoring relationships" and can take the form of sexual, gender, or racial harassment (Scandura, 1998, p. 458). With such behavior the intention is negative; it is aimed at psychologically harming, putting down, or controlling the target. Again, due to their lesser power, protégés are less likely to be perpetrators of harassment. However, with more women and racial minorities moving into management positions, it is possible that some are subject to harassing protégé behavior.

### 3.2. Ineffective relationship experiences

While one or both individuals in dysfunctional relationships have malicious or negative intent toward the other, individuals in ineffective relationships have positive intentions toward each other. However, the relationship suffers because of interpersonal difficulties (Duck, 1982). Four types of dysfunction fall into this category: difficulty, spoiling, benign deception, and submissiveness. Difficulty occurs when there are conflicts and disagreements between mentor and protégé (Scandura, 1998). These often result from differences in judgment that can lead to problems relating to one another. Another manifestation of difficulty not discussed by Scandura (1998) involves problems that arise from unclear or incompatible expectations for the relationship (Young & Perrewé, 2000). Spoiling refers to a good relationship that has soured because of real or perceived disloyalty or disappointment (Scandura, 1998). Like difficulty, there is no bad intent toward the other person; rather, the interactions between relational partners become ineffective over time. For example, the relationship may be viewed as stagnant, too intense, stifling, or requiring too much commitment (Duck, 1981). Benign deception is also conceptualized as marking an ineffective relationship. Benign deception includes behaviors such as impression management and ingratiation where the intent is to enhance one's self-image (O'Hair & Cody, 1994; Scandura, 1998). Even though no harm is intended, it violates relational trust which is an essential component of effective relationships (Huston & Burgess, 1979). Finally, submissiveness may lead to over dependence on the mentor, which can create relational difficulties and lead to the termination of a mentorship (Ragins & Scandura, 1997; Scandura, 1998). It can also contribute to controlling behavior on the part of the mentor, establishing a pattern of relating which does not contribute to protégé growth and individuation from the mentor (Kram, 1985).

### 3.3. Marginally effective relationship experiences

While Scandura (1998) outlines a variety of relational problems, the focus is on dysfunctional relationships. Omitted from the discussion are problems that do not create serious dysfunction, but reduce relationship effectiveness. Ragins and colleagues (Ragins et al., 2000) found that the quality of mentoring relationships was a critical explanatory variable in understanding protégé job and career attitudes. They coined the phrase "marginal mentoring" to classify those relationships that teetered on the edge between being effective and ineffective. We apply the idea of marginal mentoring to the mentor's perspective and propose two relational problems that indicate marginally effective relationships, both of which involve expectations associated with the protégé role.

Protégés are expected to learn from their mentors, and through such guidance both work performance and career progress should be enhanced (Kram, 1985). Mentors view both motivation to learn and ability as important protégé characteristics (Allen et al., 1997, 2000). Since mentors view these characteristics as desirable protégé qualities, the opposites of these dimensions (i.e., performance below expectations; unwillingness to learn) represent two additional relational problems unique

to the mentor's perspective. These problems fall under the category of marginally effective relationships since they limit the benefits that can be realized from the relationship but do not cause serious harm to the mentor or the relationship.

With this review of current mentoring theory and research in mind:

Research Question: Can the examples provided by mentors of negative experiences with protégés be classified into the following categories: negative relations, malevolent deception, sabotage, harassment, difficulty, spoiling, benign deception, submissiveness, performance not meeting expectations, and unwillingness to learn?

Hypothesis 1: The frequency with which mentors report various relational problems with protégés will vary based on whether the examples indicate dysfunctional, ineffective, or marginally effective relationships. Specifically, it is expected that marginally effective relationship experiences will be most frequently reported, followed by ineffective relationship experiences, and then dysfunctional relationship experiences.

## 4. Negative experiences with protgs and relational quality

Scholars who study other types of relationships such as marriages and friendships note that problems are a natural part of all relationships (Wood & Duck, 1995) and discuss how perceptions of relational events determine the future course of a relationship (Hinde, 1981; Duck, 1992). Thus, a second purpose of the present study was to understand the relationship between mentors' perceptions of their negative experiences and relational quality. Because the literature discusses relationship longevity and satisfaction as markers of high quality relationships (e.g., Graziano & Musser, 1982; Levinger, 1979; Sprecher, 1992), both were examined in relation to two global perceptions of negative experiences with protégés. Since a negative experience with a protégé could represent an isolated event (e.g., one act of deception, failure to perform on one project) or be a recurring problem (e.g., a pattern of deception, on-going performance problem), we examined the extent to which the reported experience represents the typical pattern of relating with the protégé (typicality). Another variable of interest is the mentor's report of how much the experience impacted his or her feelings about the relationship (impact). This is important since the same type of experience may affect mentors differently based on how resilient the relationship is and the unique relational dynamics between mentor and protégé.

In describing relationship problems, Duck (1992) uses the analogy of a wave, suggesting that each negative event moves a relationship closer to deterioration. Thus, a series of mediated relationships are proposed, with typicality of the experience as the proposed catalyst and relationship longevity as the criterion (see Fig. 2). Since relationships marked by recurring problems are more likely to deteriorate over time (Levinger, 1983), a negative relationship was expected between the typicality of the negative experience and relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). Further, we reasoned that the impact of the experience would serve as a partial mediator of this relationship. Specifically, experiences which are more typical should have a greater
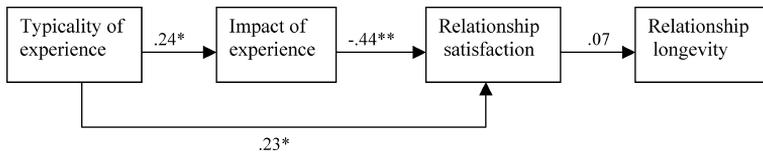
Fig. 2. Proposed relationships among typicality, impact, relationship satisfaction, and longevity. *Note*. Numbers represent path coefficients. $*p < .05$ (one-tailed).

impact on the relationship (Hypothesis 3) and as the reported impact increases, relationship satisfaction would be expected to decrease (Hypothesis 4). Finally, consistent with research on other types of relationships such as marriages (e.g., Rusbult, 1983), we predicted that mentors reporting greater satisfaction would be in mentoring relationships of longer duration (Hypothesis 5).

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Subjects

Ninety mentors provided data for the present study. These individuals were largely Caucasian (85%) males (76%) in their early forties ($M = 42.27$; $SD = 8.26$) employed in a variety of organizations (48% in the service sector and 52% in manufacturing). Participants had an average of 12.04 years organizational tenure ($SD = 9.13$), and most (70%) were in upper-level managerial positions. The gender composition of the mentoring dyads used in the analyses was 59% male–male, 14% female–female, and 25% cross-sex (18% male mentor-female protégé; 7% female mentor–male protégé), with 2% missing data. About half of these relationships were assigned (i.e., the mentor reported that the protégé was assigned to him or her) (48%) and 96% were with protégés in the same organization. The majority of protégés were direct reports (60%), with the rest being individuals at the same level (19%), one level below but not subordinate (14%), or other (7%).

### 5.2. Procedure

Data were collected as part of a 360° feedback system conducted in an executive education program at a large southeastern university. A total of 253 surveys were distributed and 204 were completed, yielding an 81% response rate. One part of the survey asked about mentoring activities. The following instructions were provided: "This section deals with mentoring relationships you have had in the past or are involved in currently. Mentoring is a developmental relationship in which a more advanced, experienced or knowledgeable person (the mentor) is committed to providing career and personal support to another individual (the protégé). A protégé may be a person's direct subordinate, other organizational subordinate, peer, or an individual in a different organization." Following this descriptor, the question was asked "How

many protégés have you had during your career?'' If the individual reported none, he/she skipped the subsequent questions. If one or more relationships were noted, he/she continued. Thus, only those with experience as a mentor ($n = 161$) were prompted to answer questions about their specific experiences as a mentor.

For those with experience as a mentor, we then asked: ''How many of your relationships with protégés have NOT been beneficial to you?'' One hundred and twelve participants indicated that they had been in at least one relationship that was not beneficial. These mentors were then prompted to read the following statement: ''Sometimes mentoring relationships begin positively, but over time may deteriorate. Sometimes, mentoring relationships never get off to a good start. As a consequence, some people have negative mentoring experiences. Think about your most negative relationship with a specific protégé. This can be a current relationship or one you have had in the past.'' Following this statement we asked information pertinent to that relationship (e.g., protégé sex, relationship length, and whether the relationship was ongoing). Next, we solicited the open-ended comments to obtain examples of negative experiences: ''In the space provided below, please describe what it was about this mentoring relationship that made it so *negative* for you. Please do not identify who your protégé was. Use a pseudonym (e.g., John Doe) if necessary. Please provide as many *specific examples* as possible of things your protégé did, qualities of your protégé, ways you interacted, or key situations that made the relationship not work well for you.'' One hundred and three mentors provided a narrative response to this statement. However, only 90 of these narratives described specific experiences with protégés which could be used for coding purposes. The remaining 13 narratives either provided vague statements (e.g., ''we had problems'') or did not describe relational problems (e.g., ''we had a good relationship'') and were therefore not used in the present study.

### 5.2.1. Measures
#### 5.2.1.1. Perceptions of negative experiences.
Following the question asking for a narrative account of their most negative experience, several closed-ended questions were asked. *Typicality* of the reported negative experience was assessed by: ''To what extent is/was this type of interaction typical of your relationship?'' Three response options were provided, ranging from $1 =$ Not at all typical to $3 =$ Very typical. *Perceived impact* of the negative experience was assessed with: ''How much did this type of interaction impact your feelings about the relationship?'' Three response options were provided, ranging from $1 =$ Not at all to $3 =$ Very much. Mentor *relationship satisfaction* was assessed with the item ''Overall, how would you rate this relationship?'' ($1 =$ Very unsatisfactory to $5 =$ Very satisfactory). *Relationship longevity* was measured with the following question: ''How long (in years) did the relationship last?'' Twenty-five percent of the relationships were described as on-going.

### 5.3. Content analysis procedure

First, mentors' descriptions of negative experiences with their protégés were transcribed verbatim and we decided which aspects of the narrative should be

coded as an example of a negative experience. An example of a negative experience was conceptualized as a unique idea or thought about a specific relationship with a protégé which described either: (1) a specific behavior that the protégé engaged in (e.g., "performance issues developed...her attention to detail, dependability, and judgment were less than acceptable...she did not carry her load as a team member, resulting in others losing confidence in her and at times resenting her"); (2) a specific quality of the protégé (e.g., "the most self-centered individual I have ever encountered"); or (3) a specific aspect of the way the two interacted which was not effective (e.g., "...said some very negative things about me...did not have the courage to come and talk to me about these issues"). Vague statements or general commentaries about the relationship (e.g., "Our relationship was unstated and thus perhaps unclear") or descriptors of the relationships that were not negative (e.g., "Through the years, the situation has improved") were excluded. As such, a transcript could contain several unique experiences associated with a particular relationship. Using these criteria, a total of 149 distinct examples were obtained from 90 mentors.

We then developed a coding taxonomy based on the nine a priori categories described previously. An "Other" category was included to capture examples that did not fit into one of the a priori categories. A deductive approach such as this one is the recommended method for studies that aim to confirm a theory or existing taxonomy (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994). The a priori categories are referred to as meta-themes in the sections that follow. Two trained researchers independently coded the transcripts. The percent agreement between researchers was 91%. In the case of disagreements, discussion was used to reach consensus.

## 6. Results

Seventy percent of the initial sample of 161 mentors reported having had at least one negative mentoring experience, with 56% providing usable narrative information about their experience ($n = 90$ mentors). Table 1 presents the frequency of examples that fit into each meta-theme, along with quotations to illustrate each meta-theme. When a pattern of similar examples emerged within a given meta-theme, themes were developed. For example, the meta-theme of unwillingness to learn contains the more specific themes of unresponsiveness and defensiveness (see Table 1).

### 6.1. Examples and relative frequency as reported by mentors

Of the 149 examples coded, 84% ($n = 125$) were captured using the nine a priori categories, with the remaining 16% ($n = 24$) being classified as "Other." As shown in Table 1, examples associated with dysfunctional experiences comprised 15.1% of 149 examples provided by mentors. Of these, 7.4% of examples in this category reflected negative relations, which included the themes of exploitative (4%) and ego-centric (3%) protégé behavior. Other examples of dysfunctional experiences

Table 1
Results of content analysis of negative mentoring experiences

| *Dysfunctional relationship experiences (15.1% of all examples)* | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Negative relations** | **11 (07.4%)** | |
| Exploitative | 06 (04%) | "The person 'used' the relationship for personal gain at the expense of other employees at her level" |
| | | "All actions taken by this individual were carefully considered by him to find any possible 'edge' for him to exploit" |
| Ego-centric | 05 (03%) | "John Doe had an ego that wouldn't quit. He was talented and skillful, but not sure he could learn anything else" |
| | | "This person was the most self-centered individual I have ever encountered" |
| **Malevolent deception** | **07 (04.7%)** | "He was oriented about manipulation and scheming" |
| | | "Protégé presented numbers/justifications incompletely. Tried to present new concepts as 'implemented' vs. 'in development'" |
| **Sabotage** | **03 (02.0%)** | "I found out that my protégé had said some very negative things about me and was not happy with my management style. What made it negative was that during our working relationship, she did not have the courage to come and talk to me about these issues" |
| **Harassment** | **01 (01.0%)** | "…he referred to his penis and then bragged about it to his co-workers. Used racial terms – against company policy as well as my policy. Told me I couldn't tell him how to talk" |
| *Ineffective relationship experiences (32.1% of all examples)* | | |
| **Difficulty** | **23 (15.4%)** | "Protégé spoke in rapid-fire generic terms, which was a constant source of aggravation for both of us when I applied an analytical approach to his explanation of events. He believed I was 'nit picking' details, I thought he was evasive" |
| | | "We saw many things differently and had some difficulty communicating clearly" |
| | | "Largest problem was difference in expectations" |
| **Spoiling** | **11 (07.4%)** | "The person began to resent me. I have yet to figure out why" |
| | | "I was very disappointed in his lack of loyalty. I had previously worked with him at another company and hired him when he became disenchanted with his job. Given this, and the time I invested in him on [his work-related problems], I was floored when he announced he was quitting our company to go to work for someone else" |
| | | "My protégé of 2 years began having an affair with my boss who was married. …when I promoted the protégé, who was clearly qualified and deserving, it was viewed by staff as a reward for her extracurricular activities, casting doubt on my management skills. It made my reporting relationships both up and down very awkward….I felt betrayed and disappointed" |
| **Benign deception** | **09 (06.0%)** | "Protégé was more interested in being perceived well than actually doing well" |
| | | "This individual wanted me as a mentor to gain my approval vs. to learn and make real changes where necessary" |
| | | "[She] was not totally honest about the level of her skills" |

Table 1 (*continued*)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Submissiveness** | **05 (03.3%)** | "It is difficult for me to get him to think on his own for new projects. Key situations would be [that] he has a tendency to keep asking for help even when he has a clear-cut path and the resources he needs to finish the project" |
| | | "[Protégé] was looking for praise and recognition for acceptable performance" |
| *Marginally effective relationship experiences (36.8% of all examples)* | | |
| **Performance below expectations** | **32 (21.4%)** | "My protégé was frequently late for meetings. She came across like the program we were involved in was unimportant" |
| | | "My protégé was a slow worker. Very slow. Otherwise, he was intelligent, committed to detail and friendly. I spent a great deal of time working with this individual on the speed of his work. We talked about focusing on the big issues and the appropriate amount of time that should be spent re-checking work that would be reviewed. He never improved" |
| | | "The protégé was careless in his work and did not show a sense of passion for his job. The work he provided was often incorrect and he did nothing to prevent this." |
| **Unwillingness to learn** | **23 (15.4%)** | |
| Unresponsiveness | 16 (11%) | "[Problems included] his unwillingness to learn basic rudimentary processes" |
| | | "Listened, but did not practice ideas" |
| Defensiveness | 07 (05%) | "He doesn't take criticism very well – constructive or otherwise. He takes it as a personal attack" |
| | | "Protégé was new a graduate and was immediately defensive about accepting my input" |

*Note.* Types of relationship problems are noted in italics, with the corresponding percent reflecting the percent of all examples associated with each type of problem. Meta-themes are indicated in boldface. Themes within meta-themes are in normal type. The number corresponding to each meta-theme and theme represents the frequency and the percent reflects the percent of total examples ($N = 149$) associated with each.

included malevolent deception (4.7%), sabotage (2.0%), and harassment (1.0%). A total of 32.1% examples reflected ineffective experiences (see Table 1). These included difficulty (15.4%), spoiling (7.4%), benign deception (6.0%), and submissiveness (3.3%). Finally, the most frequently reported of all examples (36.8%) involved marginally effective experiences. Examples associated with this type of relational problem consisted of performance below expectations (21.4%) and unwillingness to learn (15.4%; see Table 1). Two more specific themes emerged from unwillingness to learn: protégé unresponsiveness (11%) and protégé defensiveness (5%). Taken together, the findings support the pattern of decreasing frequencies outlined in Hypothesis 2: examples associated with marginally effective experiences were reported most frequently, followed by ineffective, and then dysfunctional experiences.

As noted previously, 24 examples (16.0%) could not be classified into the a priori categories and were placed in the "Other" category (see Table 2). Eleven of these

Table 2
Other examples of negative experiences

| **Other** | **24 (16.0%)** | |
|---|---|---|
| Personal problems | 11 (07%) | "...he went through some situations in his home life that changed or brought out new characteristics. On several occasions prior to his divorce, he would be in situations where he would show his potential in handling the department in a positive manner. Unfortunately, this was not the case after his divorce" |
| Complaining | 04 (03%) | "[He was] always talking about his treatment and fairness" "Her complaining was the key situation to our relationship not forging" |
| Gamesmanship | 04 (03%) | "Protégé was pushed ahead in the organization because of office politics, then was not capable of doing the assigned job. She was a shiner and survived by kissing up to the boss (not me)" "He preferred to learn the 'tricks of the trade' rather than the trade" |
| Jealousy and competition | 05 (03%) | "Over time there became a sense of competitiveness and jealousy between me and my protégé" "This individual thought they should have gotten the job I did, so the relationship was 'rocky' from the beginning" |

*Note.* Meta-themes are indicated in boldface. Themes within meta-themes are in normal type. The number corresponding to each meta-theme and theme represents the frequency and the percent reflects the percent of total examples ($N = 149$) associated with each.

examples reflected personal problems (7%) that protégés experienced outside their mentoring relationships. Four examples correspond to protégés who were chronic complainers (complaining, 3%) and another four examples reflected protégé gamesmanship (3%). The remaining five examples centered on issues of jealousy and competition (3%).

### 6.2. Relationships among typicality, impact, satisfaction, and longevity

Means and correlations among these variables are shown in Table 3. The relationships shown in Fig. 1 were tested using path analysis. A sub-sample of protégés ($n = 70$) who reported that their relationships were terminated were used in these analyses since one of the variables of interest is relationship longevity. In addition, since formal (arranged) relationships are typically of shorter duration than informal (unarranged) ones (cf. Ragins & Cotton, 1991), whereas supervisory mentoring relationships may be longer than non-supervisory ones, these variables were considered as control variables. However, no significant differences in longevity were found between those in formally arranged versus informal mentoring relationships ($M = 2.3$, $M = 2.7$, respectively) or between those in supervisory versus non-supervisory mentorships ($M = 2.5$, $M = 2.8$, respectively). Thus, it was not necessary to control for these variables.

A series of ordinary least squares regressions were conducted to obtain standardized beta weights for each path. Due to the directional nature of the hypotheses, one-tailed significance tests were used. In these analyses, each endogenous variable was treated as the criterion and the variables hypothesized to directly affect it were

Table 3
Correlations among typicality, impact, relationship satisfaction, and relationship longevity

|  | $M^a$ | $SD^a$ | $M^b$ | $SD^b$ | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Typicality | 1.76 | .75 | 1.77 | .73 | — | .24[+] | .13 | .01 |
| 2. Impact | 2.50 | .59 | 2.51 | .59 | .21[*] | — | −.39[**] | .03 |
| 3. Relationship satisfaction | 2.58 | .98 | 2.47 | .96 | .11 | −.35[**] | — | .07 |
| 4. Relationship longevity | 3.15 | 3.7 | 2.63 | 2.7 | .07 | −.06 | .27[*] | — |

*Note.* Correlations for the full sample appear below the diagonal and correlations based on the sub-sample of individuals reporting on terminated relationships appear above the diagonal.
[a] Means based on the full sample ($N = 90$).
[b] Means based on the sub-sample of those reporting on terminated relationships ($n = 70$).
[*] $p < .05$.
[**] $p < .01$.
[+] $p < .10$.

entered as predictors. Hypothesis 3 was supported; as reported typicality increased, so did the perceived impact of the negative experience ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$). Likewise, Hypothesis 4 was supported since greater perceived impact was associated with lower relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.44$, $p. < 01$). No support was found for Hypothesis 2; in fact, counter to prediction, typicality was significantly and positively related to satisfaction ($\beta = .23, p < .05$). Finally, the proposed relationship between relationship satisfaction and longevity was not supported (Hypothesis 5; $\beta = .07$, n.s.).

## 7. Discussion

General support was found for the continuum of relationship problems presented in Fig. 1, both with respect to the types of examples provided and the relative frequency with which they are reported. This supports and extends Scandura's (1998) theorizing about dysfunctional mentoring and is consistent with Allen and colleagues' research from the mentor's perspective (Allen et al., 1997). Some support was also found for the path model with respect to perceptions of the most negative experiences and relationship satisfaction, although these results should be viewed cautiously given the small sample size and measurement limitations discussed later. In the sections that follow, specific findings are discussed in more detail, followed by suggestions for future research, theory-building, and applied practice.

### 7.1. The nature of negative experiences with Protégés

*Examples of dysfunctional experiences.* As highlighted in Table 1, a mentor's perceptions that a protégé exploited the relationship or that a protégé was egocentric define the negative relations domain. These themes are consistent with how negative relations are discussed by both Scandura (1998) and Duck (1994), and both note that

such relational dynamics have the potential to seriously damage a relationship. It is interesting to note that research also finds instances of mentor exploitation (Eby et al., 2000), although our results demonstrate the more subtle nature of protégé enacted exploitation. Rather than overt acts of hostility as is the case with mentors (e.g., belittling protégé ideas), protégé exploitation involves giving the impression that the one is only motivated to participate in the relationship for personal gain.

Another example within dysfunctional experiences is malevolent deception. This reflects overt acts of deceit on the part of a protégé that violate mentor trust. Given the essential role of trust in close relationships (Huston & Burgess, 1979), perceptions of protégé deception may lead to psychological and/or physical withdrawal from the relationship. Examples of protégé sabotage and harassment were also found, although both were infrequently reported. As was the case with exploitation, the manifestation of protégé sabotage was different than the mentor sabotage described by Eby et al. (2000). Protégé sabotage involved acts of gossiping about one's mentor rather than active attempts at career damage (e.g., blocking promotions; cf. Eby et al., 2000). Harassment was noted only by one mentor, although the low base rate may reflect the fact that most mentors in the present study were Caucasian males.

*Examples of ineffective experiences.* As suggested by Scandura (1998), difficulty and spoiling also emerged as examples of relational problems. Difficulty reflects problems interacting interpersonally, whether due to different work styles, personalities, or perceptions. Interestingly, a similar meta-theme was identified from the protégé's perspective, namely mismatches between mentor and protégé in terms of values, work styles, and personalities (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby et al., 2000). Spoiling reflects changes in the relationship that make a previously satisfying relationship disappointing (Scandura, 1998). This may be due to decisions or actions taken by the protégé which may or may not be related to the mentoring relationship. For instance, in one of the examples a mentor discussed poor judgment on the part of a protégé who became romantically involved with a senior manager who was married. While not directed at the mentoring relationship, the protégé's actions strained the relationship and left the mentor feeling betrayed and disappointed.

Another example of ineffective relationship experiences was benign deception which manifested in protégé impression management. Arkin and Shepperd (1989) discuss self-presentation as common in organizational settings because rewards and opportunities are provided to those who are competent and highly skilled. In the present study, mentors indicated that protégés who engaged in benign deception wanted to be viewed as competent, well-liked organizational members. While less common, examples of submissiveness were also found. Consistent with research on problems associated with dependency in mentoring relationships (Ragins & Scandura, 1997), this involved over-reliance on the mentor for assistance and excessive dependence on the mentor for self-affirmation.

*Examples of marginally effective experiences.* The most commonly reported examples of problems with protégés involved performance below expectations, which reflected inadequate progress on tasks, tardiness, and carelessness. Unwillingness to learn, which included protégés who were unresponsive to feedback as well as those

who were defensive about their own shortcomings, was also frequently reported. It is important to note that mentor perceptions of poor performance and unwillingness to learn may reflect unclear (or unrealistic) performance expectations or role issues (e.g., protégé role ambiguity or role conflict) rather than actual ability or motivational deficits by protégés. Nonetheless, these findings are consistent with some of the reported costs associated with being a mentor, including the time and energy involved in mentoring others and concerns over whether it is worth the trouble to mentor others (Allen et al., 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Furthermore, mentor benefits include seeing the protégé develop professionally, learning from the protégé, and passing knowledge on to others (Allen et al., 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). These relational goals may not be met if a mentor is working with a protégé who is believed to be lacking in motivation or skills.

*Other examples.* Four additional types of examples emerged from the data, one of which was jealousy and competition. Kram (1985) found evidence of this in her discussion of a destructive mentor–protégé relationship, where the relationship started out as mutually beneficial, but over time became frustrating and stressful. Jealousy is also discussed as a dysfunctional relationship dynamic in romantic relationships since it can lead to suspicion, reduced trust, and other counterproductive behavior (Marshall, 1994). Given this literature, we tentatively suggest that jealousy and competition should be placed in the dysfunctional category in our continuum of relationship problems. Another example was gamesmanship, which reflected the perception that protégés had a political agenda that played out in their interactions with others in the organization. Gamesmanship may be classified as ineffective in our continuum of relationship problems because it may lead the mentor to question the protégé's character and motives, yet it is not aimed at intentionally harming the mentor or the mentoring relationship. A third example includes personal problems, such as protégés with low self-esteem and confidence issues, as well as difficulties related to managing other personal relationships (e.g., marital problems). A final example is protégé complaining, particularly with respect to inequities within the organization. These last two examples fit best in the marginally effective category of relational problems since they do not involve malice and are expected to reduce the potential of the relationship to meet mentor and/or protégé needs.

## 7.2. Relationships among typicality, impact, satisfaction, and longevity

As expected, the more typical the negative experience was perceived, the more it was reported as impacting the relationship. In addition, the greater the negative experience's perceived impact on the relationship, the lower the reported relationship satisfaction. This supports Duck's (1982) idea that relationship problems do not typically represent isolated events but processes that extend over time and have a cumulative effect on the relationship, ultimately leading to decreased emotional attachment to the relationship. These findings also highlight the importance of tracking relationships over time to understand the process of relationship decline, particularly with respect to the specific types of problems that are most damaging to relationship satisfaction.

Interestingly, relationship satisfaction was not significantly related to longevity of the relationship. While this seems counterintuitive (i.e., why would someone stay in a dissatisfying relationship?), there is research to indicate that variables other than satisfaction may be important to consider. For instance, some individuals may stay in marginally satisfying, or even dissatisfying relationships if they have invested heavily in the relationship (e.g., time, energy) or have few alternatives (Rusbult, 1983). The public nature of the mentoring relationship may also be important to consider (Duck, 1982). Mentors may not want to ''give up'' on a protégé for fear that it will reflect badly on their mentoring ability or lead to a lot of explaining to other organizational members. We are also surprised that experiences reported as more typical were related to greater (rather than lesser) satisfaction.

## 7.3. Suggestions for research and theory-building

Scholars have begun to incorporate negative mentoring experiences more explicitly into mentoring theory (e.g., Feldman, 1999; Scandura, 1998). The current research contributes to this endeavor by examining the mentor's perspective on relational difficulties and by organizing these experiences along a theoretical continuum of severity. Because mentors have different relational needs than protégés, and because relationship dysfunction occurs when the major needs of one or both parties are not being met, it seems particularly important to clearly differentiate mentors' reports of relational problems from those of protégés. Moreover, while some of the types of experiences reported by mentors in the current study are similar to those reported by protégés in previous research (Eby et al., 2000), we found important differences as well.

In terms of similarities, the category of difficulty in the present study mirrors what Eby et al. (2000) refer to as mismatches from the protégé's perspective; difficulties relating to one another based on work style, personality, etc. In addition, both mentors and protégés report instances of sabotage, deception, egomaniacal behavior, personal problems, and performance problems on the part of their partner. Interestingly, and probably reflective of the differential power between mentors and protégés, we found mentors' reports of protégé sabotage and exploitation to be more subtle and covert than those reported by protégés in previous research (Eby et al., 2000). For instance, mentors' reports of sabotage typically involved finding out that the protégé had said negative things about the mentor behind his or her back whereas in previous research protégés' reports of sabotage includes career derailment and providing failing evaluations on performance evaluations. Unique negative experiences reported by mentors include protégé submissiveness, spoiling, gamesmanship, jealousy and competition, as well as unwillingness to learn on the part of the protégé.

In addition to the further delineation of relational difficulties from both parties' perspectives, the relationships among different types of relational difficulties reported in Table 1 should be investigated in order to identify possible clusters of problematic interactions. For instance, sabotage and deceit may co-occur, while difficulty and performance below expectations may cluster together. To accomplish this, a valid

Likert-type measure of negative experiences with protégés is needed. Outcomes of relational problems also should be investigated further. For instance, how specific types of dysfunction are related perceptions of typicality and impact. Furthermore, the positive and negative aspects of mentoring should be studied simultaneously in order to explore how they are related (e.g., are negative experiences offset by positive ones?) and how they interact to affect individuals' assessments of the relationship and other outcomes.

Another area of interest is the relationship between negative experiences and how the relationship was formed (formally versus informally). In formal mentorships individuals may be less committed to, and motivated to invest in, the relationship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). This may increase the likelihood of negative experiences in formal mentoring relationships. A related area of interest has to do with the relationship between negative experiences and relationship termination. While previous research has found that jealousy, dependency, lack of support, and outgrowing the relationship are catalysts for relationship termination (Ragins & Scandura, 1997), we asked mentors why their relationship ended and only 6 mentors (7%) reported that it was due to problems in the relationship. The majority of mentors mentioned protégé resignation (25%), protégé termination (18%), or transfers from the organization (25%). This raises the question for future research of why mentors would stay in problematic relationships, particularly those categorized as dysfunctional.

The demographic composition of the mentor-protégé dyad may also be an important variable to consider in understanding the prevalence of negative mentoring experiences. Research on diversified mentoring suggests that race and gender may be particularly important to consider (Ragins, 1997) in explaining the prevalence of negative mentoring experiences. For example, gender-role expectations may lead a male mentor to expect a female protégé to assume a more subordinate or passive role in a mentoring relationship thus allowing the mentor to serve as a parent figure for the protégé. This in turn may lead to relational problems of submissiveness from the protégé. To explore this issue we conducted post hoc analyses to examine differences in the frequency of negative experiences reported as a function of the sex composition of the dyad. No significant differences were obtained although it is important to note that we had limited power due detect such effects because analyses were conducted on each specific type of negative experience. Likewise, Caucasian mentors who believe some race-related stereotypes may be more likely to report unwillingness to learn or performance below expectations when in a relationship with an African American protégé. Other dyadic characteristics such as age diversity and perceived similarity could be explored as well. Demographic composition variables might also be examined in relation to whether the mentorship was initiated formally versus informally.

### 7.4. Implications for practice

Our findings are important for organizational decision-makers since these results may temper the commonly held perception that mentoring is a cure-all for em-

ployee development (Kram, 1985). This may lead to dialogue among potential mentors and protégés about possible relationship problems and facilitate more realistic expectations about mentoring relationships (Eby & Allen, 2002). In the context of formal mentoring relationships this could occur in training or orientation sessions. The same advice holds for individuals in informal relationships, although it would be incumbent upon the mentor and protégé to initiate this discussion on their own. Further, recognition of the potential problems associated with mentoring relationships may help individuals make sound decisions about when to exit a relationship. For example, a mentor who experiences serious relationship problems such as negative relations or sabotage would be well advised to consider terminating the relationship. Understanding the various manifestations of negative experiences with protégés may also provide information about the types of interventions that might be effective in reducing their occurrence. For instance, accountability and feedback systems (e.g., having mentors provide appraisals of protégés which are then shared with the protégé's supervisor) may lessen the chance that protégés engage in behavior characterized as dysfunctional for the relationship (e.g., sabotage).

### 7.5. Limitations and conclusions

Several limitations of the current study should be noted. First, the sample of mentors was quite homogeneous in terms of race (mostly Caucasian), managerial level (mostly high level managers), and sex (mostly males). While this probably represents the average profile of mentors in most organizations, the unique negative experiences that might face non-Caucasian and female mentors were not addressed. Given increasing workplace diversity, this represents an important area for future research. Related to the methodology utilized, respondents were asked to provide examples of their most negative mentoring relationship. This helped focus respondents' attention on a particularly salient negative mentoring relationship, but doing so did not allow them to report other, perhaps less severe, experiences. Moreover, the narrative nature of the responses did not allow for follow-up questions. Future research on this topic would benefit from the use of structured interviews that cover the gamut of negative experiences with protégés beyond reports of the most negative relationship. It is also important to note that we could not ascertain the veracity of mentors' statements, and it is possible that mentors' recollections were different from the way the events actually occurred. To help alleviate this concern, information reported by mentors was not coded unless it referred to specific actions or behaviors on the part of the protégé. Furthermore, strong arguments have been made that perceptions of a relationship are important to study in their own right since they influence the future course of a relationship (Hinde, 1981).

Another limitation involves the use of single-item measures of typicality, perceived impact, and relationship satisfaction. Due to survey space limitations, multi-item measures could not be used. Certainly this would have allowed for stronger measurement, and given that we could not assess the reliability of these

measures, caution should be used in interpreting the results of the path analysis. Further, using only three response options for the typicality and impact questions restricts variance on these measures and attenuates some of the relationships illustrated in Table 3 and Fig. 2.

Finally, the use of a deductively oriented taxonomy to classify examples may be viewed as a limitation since it assigns meaning to participants' responses rather than allowing examples to emerge from the data. However, there are several reasons why a deductively oriented taxonomy was appropriate in this research. First, the study was designed to confirm existing theory rather than create a new one, and under such circumstances using an a priori coding scheme is recommended (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, research comparing first-order (inductively derived) and second-order (deductively derived) constructs illustrates considerable overlap between the two (Taber, 1991). Finally, we verified our a priori taxonomy by having a subject matter expert inductively derive categories. The results converged nicely with our a priori coding scheme (information on this verification process is available upon request).

Despite these limitations, the current study offers an initial examination of negative mentoring experiences from the mentor's perspective and organizes such experiences along a meaningful continuum of severity. Given the widespread use of mentoring in organizations, future research is needed to further understand the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of the wide variety of difficult mentoring experiences. We encourage such efforts and hope that consideration of both the positive and negative aspects of mentoring leads to a more balanced and realistic perspective on the promises, as well as the potential pitfalls, of organizational mentoring.

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