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Mentor-protégé commitment fit and relationship satisfaction in academic mentoring

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ABSTRACT

Based on a sample of students and their faculty mentors, this study examined how the fit between mentor and protégé levels of commitment is associated with both partners' relationship satisfaction. Mentoring dyads were classified into groups according to fit between partners' commitment, and relationship satisfaction was compared across groups. Overall, results provided partial support for our hypothesis that mentors and protégés report greatest satisfaction when commitment levels are mutually high. Specific results varied depending on the source of reported commitment levels (i.e., mentor vs. protégé reports). Implications are discussed in terms of the importance of both mentor and protégé commitment.

1. Introduction

Scholarly interest in mentoring relationships has grown considerably over the past several decades. Mentoring has been shown to benefit individuals across the lifespan (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). For example, mentoring has been shown to be a deterrent of risky youth behavior (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) and graduate students who establish strong mentoring relationships with their academic advisors report enhanced personal and professional development (Huwe & Johnson, 2003). Within the workplace, mentoring has been associated with a variety of career benefits (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Less is known regarding interpersonal factors that contribute to mentoring effectiveness. One theoretically important, but understudied driver of successful mentoring relationships is commitment (Allen & Eby, 2008; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005).

Although commitment is a relatively new construct within the mentoring literature, it has been investigated within the interpersonal relationships literature for quite some time. Researchers in the area of interpersonal relationships have emphasized the importance of commitment, referring to it as a fundamental property of relationships (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Empirical evidence supports this claim, revealing that commitment predicts important pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Van Lange et al., 1997). Such findings have led mentoring researchers to examine whether commitment plays a role in mentoring relationships, as well.

Thus far, commitment research on mentoring relationships has focused on the role of the mentor's commitment. Overall, findings have shown greater mentor commitment to be associated with positive outcomes such as mentor and protégé reports of relationship satisfaction and formal mentoring program effectiveness (Allen & Eby, 2008; Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005). However, in addition to examining mentor commitment, researchers have called for an investigation of the role of protégé commitment (Allen & Eby, 2008; Allen et al., 2006). To our knowledge, there have been no

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studies examining protégé commitment to the mentoring relationship. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine the role of both mentor and protégé commitment. More specifically, this study examined how the fit between mentor and protégé commitment was associated with relationship satisfaction within an academic mentoring context. Relationship satisfaction is a key outcome to study given that it is an indicator of success for all forms of relationships (Allen & Eby, 2003). Importantly, this study also answers the call for more research that examines dynamics between both mentors and protégés simultaneously as opposed to solely from the perspective of the mentor or the protégé (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008).

1.1. Commitment in interpersonal relationships

Within the interpersonal relationships literature, commitment has been defined in terms of three components: (1) intent to persist, (2) long-term orientation, and (3) psychological attachment (Finkel et al., 2002). Researchers have examined the outcomes associated with both level of commitment and mutuality of commitment (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). In general, research has consistently shown that higher levels of commitment are associated with healthy functioning in relationships. For example, Drigotas et al. (1999) found a positive relationship between level of commitment and couple well-being.

Researchers define mutuality of commitment as the degree of similarity in partners' levels of commitment to their relationship (Drigotas et al., 1999). Nonmutuality exists when an individual is either more committed or less committed than his or her partner. As expected, Drigotas et al. found that mutuality of commitment was positively associated with couple well-being. One explanation the authors provided for this finding was that the negative emotions accompanying nonmutuality are detrimental to well-being. For example, individuals who are more committed to their relationship than their partner may experience anxiety, insecurity, and mistrust, which may lead to decreased well-being. Similarly, individuals who are less committed to their relationship than their partner may experience unwanted responsibility, irritation, guilt, or resentment, which may also have a negative effect on couple well-being. In support of this explanation, Drigotas et al. found that negative affect was negatively related to mutuality of commitment and mediated the relationship between mutuality and well-being. Thus, it appears that both level and mutuality of commitment are important in relationships, with the greatest well-being achieved when partners are equally and fully committed to each other.

1.2. Commitment in mentoring relationships

Within the mentoring literature, commitment has been examined in each of the three major areas of mentoring: youth mentoring, workplace mentoring, and academic mentoring. As mentioned earlier, the focus has been on the role of mentor commitment, with the overall finding that mentor commitment is associated with positive outcomes (e.g., Allen & Eby, 2008; Allen et al., 2006; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005; Sipe, 2002). For example, in a study of formal mentoring, Allen and Eby found that protégé and mentor reports of mentor commitment were positively related to protégé reports of relationship quality. In a study examining student–faculty mentoring relationships, Ortiz-Walters and Gilson found mentor commitment to be positively associated with mentor relationship satisfaction. Thus, the link between commitment and relationship satisfaction found in research on interpersonal relationships appears to apply to mentoring relationships.

1.3. The current study

In response to the recent call for studies that investigate the roles of both mentor and protégé commitment in mentoring relationships, we examined the association between mentor and protégé commitment and relationship satisfaction. More specifically, we examined how the fit between protégé and mentor levels of commitment was associated with protégé and mentor relationship satisfaction. In general, research on commitment in the interpersonal and mentoring relationships literature suggests that level of commitment and mutuality of commitment are positively associated with favorable relationship outcomes. Based on this general finding, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Protégé relationship satisfaction is greatest in mentor-protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually high, compared to: (1) mentor-protégé pairs in which the protégé is more committed than the mentor; (2) mentor-protégé pairs in which the mentor is more committed than the protégé; and (3) mentor-protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually low.

Hypothesis 2. Mentor relationship satisfaction is greatest in mentor-protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually high, compared to: (1) mentor-protégé pairs in which the protégé is more committed than the mentor; (2) mentor-protégé pairs in which the mentor is more committed than the protégé; and (3) mentor-protégé pairs in which mentor and protégé commitment levels are mutually low.

Hypotheses were tested in three different ways. First, hypotheses were tested using mentor and protégé self-reported levels of commitment. It was predicted that mentors and protégés would be most satisfied when their self-reported levels of commitment were mutually high. Second, the hypotheses were tested by using protégé reports of their own commitment and protégé reports of their mentors' commitment (i.e., perceived mentor commitment). In accordance with Hypothesis 1, protégés were expected to report greatest satisfaction when they reported that they and their mentor were mutually

and highly committed. In addition, it was predicted that the fit between protégé self-reported commitment and perceived mentor commitment would be associated with mentor relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). Based on the ideas presented by Drigotas et al. (1999), when a protégé perceives that he/she is more or less committed than the mentor, the protégé may experience negative emotions. These negative emotions may affect the mentor such that the mentor experiences lower relationship satisfaction. Thus, it was expected that mentors would report greatest relationship satisfaction when their protégés reported that they were mutually and highly committed.

The third way that the hypotheses were tested was by using mentor reports of their own commitment and their protégés' commitment (i.e., perceived protégé commitment). Mentors were expected to report greatest satisfaction when reports of their own commitment and their protégés' commitment were mutually high (Hypothesis 2). Additionally, protégé relationship satisfaction was predicted to be greatest when mentors reported that they and their protégés were mutually and highly committed. This prediction is based on the same line of reasoning presented earlier: If a mentor perceives nonmutuality in commitment, as proposed by Drigotas et al. (1999), this may have a negative effect on the protégé's relationship satisfaction. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was expected to hold true when using mentor reports of mentor and protégé commitment levels.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 97 dyads composed of doctoral students and their faculty mentors from a variety of academic disciplines at a large southeastern university. Of those providing demographic information, 34.7% of the students were male and 68.4% of the faculty mentors were male. The majority of the students and faculty were white (68.4% and 83.0%, respectively).

Doctoral students were contacted via email and asked to voluntarily participate in the study by completing an online survey. Students who chose to participate clicked on a link provided in the email, which directed them to the online survey. One of the items asked students to provide the name of their faculty mentor. Using this information, emails were sent to the mentors, asking them to complete a separate online survey by clicking on the link provided in the email. Code numbers were used to match faculty mentors with their student protégés.

2.2. Measures

There were two surveys—one for the student protégés, and one for the faculty mentors. The protégé survey included scales measuring relationship satisfaction, protégé commitment, and perceived mentor commitment. The mentor version included scales measuring relationship satisfaction, mentor commitment, and perceived protégé commitment. Responses to all items were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scale scores were calculated by averaging the item responses, with higher scores indicating greater standing on the variable. Coefficient alphas are reported in Table 1.

2.2.1. Relationship satisfaction

Protégé and mentor relationship satisfaction consisted of three items designed to assess satisfaction with the student–faculty mentoring relationship [e.g., "I am satisfied with the relationship with my major professor (this student)"].

2.2.2. Self-report commitment

Student protégés and faculty mentors self-reported their commitment to their relationship by responding to four items designed specifically for this study [e.g., "I am committed to developing an effective and productive working relationship with my major professor (this student)"].

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, alphas, and intercorrelations among study measures.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Protégé relationship satisfaction	(.96)					
2. Mentor relationship satisfaction	.43*	(.94)				
3. Protégé self-reported commitment	.71*	.31*	(.73)			
4. Mentor self-reported commitment	.18	.55*	.30*	(.53)		
5. Perceived mentor commitment	.79*	.35*	.74*	.34*	(.84)	
6. Perceived protégé commitment	.44*	.81*	.43*	.55*	.42*	(.87)
Mean	4.13	4.30	3.84	4.16	3.88	3.96
SD	.91	.71	.77	.58	.83	.83

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent coefficient alphas.
* $p < .01$. $N = 97$.

Table 2
Relationship satisfaction by commitment fit using protégé and mentor self-reported commitment.

Commitment fit	Protégé relationship satisfaction	Mentor relationship satisfaction
1. P > M (n = 28)	4.58_{a} (SD = .68)	4.11_{ab} (SD = .62)
2. M > P (n = 34)	3.57_{b} (SD = .89)	4.42_{ac} (SD = .68)
3. P = M, low (n = 13)	3.87_{bc}[†] (SD = .74)	3.74_{b} (SD = .95)
4. P = M, high (n = 22)	4.56_{ac} (SD = .77)	4.67_{c} (SD = .42)

Note. Commitment fit was determined using protégé and mentor self-reported commitment. P, protégé commitment; M, mentor commitment. Column means having the same subscript are not significantly different at $p < .05$.
[†] Protégé relationship satisfaction in the mutually low commitment group was marginally significantly different from the mutually high commitment group (p = .066).

2.2.3. Other-report commitment

Protégés and mentors responded to four items designed to measure how committed they perceived their mentoring partner to be to their relationship [e.g., "My major professor (This student) is committed to developing an effective and productive advising relationship"].

3. Results

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability estimates are presented in Table 1. Hypotheses were first tested using protégé and mentor self-reported commitment levels. Using procedures described by Sosik and Godshalk (2004), mentoring dyads were assigned to one of four groups based on the fit between protégé and mentor self-reported commitment levels: (1) protégé more committed than mentor; (2) mentor more committed than protégé; (3) mutually low levels of commitment; and (4) mutually high levels of commitment.[1] MANOVA was conducted with protégé and mentor relationship satisfaction as the dependent variables and commitment fit group as the independent variable. Results revealed a significant difference in group means, $\Lambda = .52$, $F(6,184) = 11.74$, $p < .001$. Follow-up ANOVAs were then conducted to examine group differences on each of the dependent variables separately. ANOVA results with protégé relationship satisfaction revealed a significant difference among the commitment fit groups, $F(3,93) = 11.53$, $p < .001$. Results of a Tukey post hoc test are shown in Table 2. Partial support for Hypothesis 1 was found in that protégés in the mutually high commitment group reported significantly greater relationship satisfaction than did protégés in the group in which the mentor reported higher commitment than the protégé. Protégés in the mutually high commitment group also reported greater relationship satisfaction than did protégés in the mutually low commitment group, but this difference was only marginally significant (p = .066).

ANOVA results with mentor relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable revealed significant group differences, $F(3,93) = 6.55$, $p < .001$. As shown in Table 2, results of the Tukey post hoc test provided partial support for Hypothesis 2. Mentors in the mutually high commitment group reported greater relationship satisfaction than did mentors in the mutually low commitment group and than did mentors in the group in which protégés reported higher commitment than mentors.

Study hypotheses were next tested using protégé reports of protégé and mentor commitment levels. MANOVA results revealed significant group differences, $\Lambda = .72$, $F(6,184) = 5.46$, $p < .001$. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated a significant difference among the groups on protégé relationship satisfaction, $F(3,93) = 6.79$, $p < .001$, but no significant differences on mentor relationship satisfaction, $F(3,93) = .61$, $p = .32$. As shown in Table 3, results of a Tukey post hoc test supported Hypothesis 1. Protégés reported the greatest relationship satisfaction when they perceived that they and their mentor were mutually high on commitment. On the other hand, no support was found for Hypothesis 2 when using protégé reports of protégé and mentor commitment levels. Although means were in the expected direction, mentor relationship satisfaction did not significantly differ among the commitment fit groups.

Finally, hypotheses were tested using mentor reports of protégé and mentor commitment levels. MANOVA results revealed significant group differences, $\Lambda = .60$, $F(6,184) = 8.92$, $p < .001$. A follow-up ANOVA with protégé relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable indicated significant group differences, $F(3,93) = 5.01$, $p < .004$. Results of a Tukey post hoc test, shown in Table 4, provided partial support for Hypothesis 1. Protégés in the mutually high commitment group reported greater relationship satisfaction than did protégés in the group in which mentors reported themselves to be more highly committed than their protégés.

Results of the ANOVA with mentor relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable revealed significant group differences, $F(3,93) = 17.68$, $p < .001$. As shown in Table 4, results of a Tukey post hoc test provided partial support for Hypothesis 2. Mentors in the mutually high commitment group reported greater relationship satisfaction than did mentors in the mutually low commitment group and than did mentors in the more committed than their protégés group.

[1] The decision to place a dyad in either the mutually low or mutually high commitment group was made by comparing the protégé's commitment score to the mean protégé commitment score. If the protégé's commitment score was below (above) the mean, the dyad was assigned to the mutually low (high) commitment group. This rule was also used for tests involving protégé reports of protégé and mentor commitment. For tests using mentor reports of protégé and mentor commitment, the mentor's commitment score was compared to the mean mentor commitment score to make assignments to the mutually high and mutually low commitment groups.

Table 3
Relationship satisfaction by commitment fit using protégé reports of commitment.

Commitment fit	Protégé relationship satisfaction	Mentor relationship satisfaction
1. P > PM (n = 16)	3.71_a (SD = 1.23)	4.04_a (SD = .95)
2. PM > P (n = 24)	4.10_a (SD = .93)	4.25_a (SD = .77)
3. P = PM, low (n = 24)	3.63_a (SD = .65)	4.31_a (SD = .67)
4. P = PM, high (n = 33)	4.72_b (SD = .43)	4.44_a (SD = .55)

Note. Commitment fit was determined using protégé self-reported commitment and protégé reports of mentor commitment. P, protégé commitment; PM, perceived mentor commitment. Column means having the same subscript are not significantly different at $p < .05$.

Table 4
Relationship satisfaction by commitment fit using mentor reports of commitment.

Commitment fit	Protégé relationship satisfaction	Mentor relationship satisfaction
1. PP > M (n = 33)	4.37_a (SD = .76)	4.54_a (SD = .57)
2. M > PP (n = 25)	3.56_b (SD = 1.13)	3.69_b (SD = .79)
3. PP = M, low (n = 12)	4.28_{ab} (SD = .47)	3.92_b (SD = .38)
4. PP = M, high (n = 27)	4.28_a (SD = .80)	4.73_a (SD = .39)

Note. Commitment fit was determined using mentor self-reported commitment and mentor reports of protégé commitment. M, mentor commitment; PP, perceived protégé commitment. Column means having the same subscript are not significantly different at $p < .05$.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine how the fit between protégé and mentor levels of commitment related to both protégé and mentor relationship satisfaction. We examined these associations from three different angles: using protégé and mentor self-reports of commitment, protégé self-reports of commitment and their perceptions of mentor's commitment, and mentor self-reports of commitment and their perceptions of protégé's commitment. Building on the interpersonal commitment literature, we posited that protégés and mentors would report the greatest relationship satisfaction when commitment levels were mutually high than when either mentoring partner reported greater commitment than the other or when commitment was mutually low. Although the group means consistently showed trends in the expected direction, results of the significance tests were mixed.

When using mentor and protégé self-reports of commitment, the relationship between commitment fit and protégé and mentor relationship satisfaction exhibited an interesting pattern of results. Specifically, protégés reported greatest satisfaction when commitment was mutually high or when they were more committed than their mentor. Similarly, mentors reported greatest satisfaction when commitment was mutually high or when they were more committed than their protégé. This pattern of results suggests that protégés and mentors are most satisfied when their mentoring partner is modest regarding his or her commitment to the relationship. This finding is consistent with previous research. Allen and Eby (2008) found that when mentors underestimated their commitment relative to their protégés' perceptions of the mentors' commitment, protégés reported greater relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Sosik and Godshalk (2000) found that mentors who underestimated their transformational leadership relative to their protégés were associated with the greatest protégé reported mentorship quality. One explanation provided by Allen and Eby for this finding was that mentors who underestimate their commitment may be more humble—a characteristic that protégés may find desirable in a mentor. Applying these ideas to the current study, it may be that protégés and mentors are more satisfied when their partners report less commitment than themselves because such reports may signify an unassuming nature on the part of the mentoring partner.

When examining the hypotheses using only protégé reports, the prediction that protégé relationship satisfaction would be highest for the mutually high commitment group was fully supported. In line with our initial logic, it appears that when protégés perceive high commitment on the part of both partners, they report more favorable affective evaluations of the relationship. Results were slightly different when examining the association between mentor reports of protégé and mentor commitment and mentor relationship satisfaction. Mentors were most satisfied not only when they perceived mutually high commitment, but also when they perceived their protégés to be more committed than themselves. Perhaps from the mentor's stance it is more acceptable, even desirable, for a protégé to exhibit greater commitment to a relationship. Within an academic context mentoring is primarily directed toward the training and development of the protégé. Because mentoring students takes a great deal of time, and faculty mentors often have more than one student protégé, it is not surprising that mentors would be more satisfied with relationships in which the protégé is thought to be highly engaged and committed. Mentors may perceive that this greater commitment helps offset some of the time and energy investments they place into the relationship. It may also be that when mentors view protégés as more committed, it positively enhances the mentor's ego ("She really wants to work with me, so I must be a great mentor!") and thus contributes to greater relationship satisfaction.

Another interesting pattern emerged when examining how one partner's reports of commitment related to the other partner's relationship satisfaction. It was hypothesized that when individuals perceived that they and their partner were mutually and highly committed, their partner would report the greatest relationship satisfaction. When testing this hypoth-

esis using protégé reports of protégé and mentor commitment, results showed that mentor relationship satisfaction did not significantly vary as a function of commitment fit. On the other hand, when using mentor reports of protégé and mentor commitment, protégé relationship satisfaction did vary with commitment fit. There are several possible explanations for these results. One possibility is that protégés are more influenced by mentor perceptions of commitment fit than mentors are influenced by protégé perceptions of commitment fit. Because protégés are more dependent on their mentors than mentors are on their protégés, perhaps protégés are more sensitive to the negative emotions that may accompany their mentors' perceptions of commitment misfit. In addition, protégés may cover up their own negative emotions when they perceive commitment misfit, thereby attenuating the influence of their perceptions on the mentor's relationship satisfaction.

These findings have practical implications for career development practitioners charged with the development of formal mentoring programs. To date, most of the literature has focused on the importance of mentor commitment to the health and vitality of mentoring relationships and formal mentoring programs (e.g., Allen et al., 2006). Just as there is variability in the degree that mentors invest in relationships, there is variability in the degree that protégés invest in their mentoring relationships. The results of the current study demonstrate the importance of having protégés who are committed. Committed protégés may also help with the attraction and retention of mentors, which is often a challenge in formal mentoring programs. The evaluation of the success of mentoring programs in organizational and academic institutions should include assessments of both mentor and protégé commitment. Career counselors may also want to emphasize to those seeking mentoring relationships the importance of demonstrating commitment to their mentoring partner.

There are several limitations to the study. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow us to infer causal directionality. Second, because of our relatively small overall sample size, the number of dyads in a particular commitment fit condition was sometimes small. Third, the procedure used to create the commitment fit groups was not without limitation, as gross categorization of dyads into groups according to difference and means scores necessitates a loss of information. In the future, researchers with larger samples should try other types of analyses, such as polynomial regression and response surface methods, to see how the results compare with those found in the current study. A fourth limitation is that internal consistency for the mentor self-reported commitment measure was low. This measure was developed for use in the current study and should be modified if used in future studies.

Despite these limitations, the current study is an important first step in the examination of the combined roles of mentor and protégé commitment. Results suggest that the fit between mentor and protégé commitment may be valuable in understanding mentoring relationship satisfaction. Future research should investigate the specific processes, such as emotions, that link commitment fit to relationship satisfaction. In addition, although we examined the association between commitment fit and the outcome of relationship satisfaction, there are other cognitive and behavioral outcome variables that merit investigation, such as protégé scholarly outcomes in the academic mentoring context.

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