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# Sex differences in the perceived importance of mentoring functions

Mentoring  
functions

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – To be the first study to consider the difference between men's and women's perceptions of most important mentoring functions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Survey recipients identified the three most important things that mentors can do for their protégés. Two independent coders categorized the behaviors listed by the 637 respondents.

**Findings** – There was little difference between men's and women's perceptions of important mentoring behaviors. Women more than men reported championing and acceptance and confirmation behaviors to be in what they consider the top three for importance. Additionally, the lists respondents generated under-represented the mentoring behaviors commonly identified in the extant literature, whereas some of the behaviors most frequently identified are not well represented in the mentoring literature.

**Research limitations/implications** – Respondents were graduates of a top-tier MBA program, although from multiple years. Future research should examine perceptions of mentoring behaviors by employees with different educational backgrounds and across cultures, particularly to explore perceptions of mentoring behaviors where cultural and gender stereotypes are present.

**Practical implications** – The design of mentoring programs and fostering of cross-sex mentoring are discussed in lieu of managing protégé expectations and educating mentors about actual expectations versus the expectations they might associate with the other sex.

**Originality/value** – The findings here extend existing research by first asking men and women to generate a list of what they perceive to be the three most important mentoring behaviors and then showing that, for MBAs at least, there is little difference across the sexes.

**Keywords** Mentoring, Mentors, Perception, Gender

**Paper type** Research paper

People experience different types of mentoring throughout their lives (Clawson, 1980; Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Zey, 1984). In recent years, interest in mentoring relationships at work has grown among scholars and practitioners alike, in part due to the mutual benefits they provide to both organizations and their members. In simple terms, a mentoring relationship consists of a mentor and a protégé who either informally establish the relationship themselves or participate through a more formal program sponsored by their organization (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a, b). Protégés can experience career success and increased satisfaction (Dreher and Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1988, 1989; Scandura, 1992; Turban and Dougherty, 1994; Whitely *et al.*, 1992), while mentors can benefit from an increased power base, accelerated promotions, or other rewards (Hunt



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and Michael, 1983; Zey, 1984). Organizations also realize increased employee motivation, improved retention rates, and the development of leadership talent resulting from mentoring (Burke *et al.*, 1991; Hunt and Michael, 1983; Viator and Scandura, 1991; Wilson and Elman, 1990).

The past decade has seen a growing body of research that considers differences between men's and women's mentoring relationships (for reviews, see O'Neill, 2002; Ragins, 1999). For example, it has been found that female mentors provide more psychosocial support than male mentors, whereas male mentors indicate emphasizing career-related support more than do female mentors (Allen and Eby, 2004). Ragins (1999) notes that most studies of mentoring comparing men and women have focused on which sex is more likely to consider having a mentor, the extent of help offered or received, and mentoring outcomes. Existing research recognizes many differences between men and women in mentoring relationships, noting the particular importance of these relationships for women (Burke and McKeen, 1990; Noe, 1988a; Ragins, 1989, 1997a, b, 1999). However, to date no examination has been made of the differences in men's and women's perceptions of what are the most valued components of mentoring. An understanding of mentors' perceptions of the support that protégés need is critical to deconstructing mentor behavior (Allen and Eby, 2004), as is an understanding of protégé expectations and requests for assistance. These perceptions impact expectations and subsequent behavior, perceptions of support, and even the design of formal mentoring programs. As women in management will inevitably be mentoring both men and women, understanding any gender-based perceptual differences may lead to improved cross-gender mentor relationships. Additionally, as more women aspire to move up the corporate ladder, they will seek mentors. Educating them about the existence of gender differences in the perceptions of what makes a good mentoring relationship (or the lack of differences) may influence the selection of mentors to match their needs.

The research presented here is the first to identify what men and women consider to be the most important mentoring behaviors. Using exploratory evidence, we specifically examine which mentoring behaviors are more or less important across the sexes. To do this, we first offer a brief overview of mentoring and its functions, followed by a discussion of why it is important to identify and understand differing perceptions or expectations in a mentoring relationship. The latter is relevant given that perceptions generally affect expectations and workplace behavior (Pfeffer, 1982), such that differing perceptions of mentoring should also have real impact on the actions and reactions of people involved in those mentoring relationships.

### **Mentoring in the workplace**

#### *Overview of mentoring behaviors*

Past research has concluded that a mentor's actions directly impact a protégé's career success and satisfaction (e.g. Fagenson, 1989; Lunding *et al.*, 1978) and these actions can have important career molding influences (Klauss, 1981). These actions are known as mentoring functions, and their degree, range, and comprehensiveness influence a protégé's career and personal outcomes (Clawson, 1980; Hunt and Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a, b). A score of mentoring behaviors between the social support and mentoring literatures have been identified, encompassing both career and psychosocial support to protégés (Cohen *et al.*, 1985; House, 1987; Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992). A

theoretical and empirical integration of the mentoring and social support streams of research compared the types and definitions of helping behaviors they identified and found a core of 16 mentoring functions (see O'Neill, 1997), which are described below.

Typically, mentors are experienced individuals committed to facilitating upward mobility and providing support for a protégé's personal and professional development (Hunt and Michael, 1983; Klauss, 1981; Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a; Roche, 1979). Mentoring relationships are important for protégés because they can cultivate promotions and advancement crucial for attaining career success (Fagenson, 1988; Hunt and Michael, 1983; Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Lunding *et al.*, 1978; Roche, 1979). Mentors can increase protégés' exposure to and visibility in situations where important decision makers can see and appreciate their competence, abilities, and special talents (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a, b). Mentors also champion protégés by sponsoring, supporting, acknowledging, and advocating their abilities (Kram, 1983, 1985). A mentor's protection consists of actions that either minimize the likelihood of a protégé getting involved in controversial situations or reduces unnecessary risks that threaten a protégé's reputation (Noe, 1988a). Mentors give material support such as financial aid or other material resources (Cohen *et al.*, 1985). Through mentors, protégés gain entry into social networks that enable them to obtain valuable information not often available through other channels (Dreher and Ash, 1990; Kanter, 1977; Kram, 1985), and they acquire status support by being affiliated with mentors of high status (Cohen *et al.*, 1985).

Work-related mentoring relationships aid in the development of solid technical, interpersonal, and political skills for a given occupation (Kram, 1983), and help protégés to learn how to balance conflicting professional and personal demands (Kanter, 1977). Mentors also coach their protégés by sharing ideas, providing feedback, and suggesting strategies for accomplishing work objectives (Kram, 1985). They provide on the job teaching and training to resolve work problems, provide explanations and assist with the completion of work assignments (Hunt and Michael, 1983). Mentors may allow protégés greater responsibility (Zey, 1984), particularly if they opt to design or give challenging assignments or work tasks that while difficult, remain within a protégé's abilities (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a; Phillips-Jones, 1982). Through appraisal support mentors help protégés redefine, reappraise, or reevaluate threatening situations (Cohen *et al.*, 1985). Mentors give informational support in the form of advice, guidance, suggestions, and access to information to help define, understand, and cope with various events, especially problematic ones (Cohen *et al.*, 1985). In addition to the active protection described earlier, mentors provide political assistance by socializing protégés regarding the values, customs, and politics of the organization, and by pointing out appropriate corporate behavior (Kram, 1985).

The psychosocial functions of mentoring are more personal than career oriented (Kram, 1985) and are designed to enhance a protégé's sense of competence, confidence, effectiveness, and esteem. Because mentors have the optimal traits and behaviors that one needs to attain career and personal success (Hunt and Michael, 1983), they role model appropriate attitudes, values, and behaviors for protégés to learn and follow (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a). Through personal counseling, mentors listen to and discuss personal and professional problems, concerns, and fears that the protégé may have, they offer advice, and demonstrate empathy and caring (Kram, 1985; Levinson *et al.*, 1978). As counselors, mentors provide emotional support and bolster self-esteem and

self-confidence (Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Noe, 1988a; Whitely *et al.*, 1991). They signal acceptance and confirmation through actions that convey positive regard and respect for protégés (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a; Phillips-Jones, 1982; Zey, 1984) and demonstrate faith in them (Levinson *et al.*, 1978). Friendship is provided through informal interaction with protégés at work, and by a willingness to discuss a variety of topics (Clawson, 1980). Mentors may attempt to motivate protégés by encouraging them to persist, endure frustration, or try new things (Cohen *et al.*, 1985; Kram, 1985; Schockett and Haring-Hidore, 1985).

#### *Perceptions and mentoring*

We are suggesting that individual perceptions of the importance of various mentoring behaviors matter. There is a common saying that a person's perception is his or her reality. Perceptions drive expectations and behavior (Campbell *et al.*, 1970; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), and firms want to both meet and manage such expectations as well as improve the overall quality of mentoring taking place. Mentors' beliefs and past experiences will direct them toward mentoring behaviors they value or are proficient at, and simultaneously cause them to neglect or minimize mentoring behaviors that are uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Concurrently, protégés have expectations about mentors' actions and the instrumental outcomes they might anticipate from the relationship. These, too, are based on the extent to which protégés value specific behaviors. The interpersonal relationship may be strengthened if both parties have the same implicit hierarchy associated with the importance of various behaviors, and it may be hurt by divergent expectations of what was to be expected, leading to disappointment or frustration (Rousseau, 1995). Firms can aid mentors by schooling them about a range of actions, and by indicating those behaviors protégés typically anticipate or expect. Managing employees' psychological contract with the firm regarding mentoring will ensure that protégés are aware of the opportunities, benefits, and types of mentoring behaviors to expect and request, and mentors will be aware of explicit promises that they are expected to fulfill. The danger of not attending to these issues is the attendant costs and loss of human resources resulting from perceived breach of psychological contracts by the firm (Rousseau, 1995).

Gender differences in individual perceptions of the importance of various mentoring behaviors may create problems in cross-gender mentoring relationships, particularly for women, as they are more likely than men to have cross-sex mentoring relationships (Burke *et al.*, 1990; Ragins and Cotton, 1991). Research already shows that men and women generally have different preferences for and styles of leadership (Korabik, 1990), communication (Tannen, 1990), and networking (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). Different expectations can lead to conflict or devaluation in cross-gender mentoring interactions. This could be an issue for women in leadership positions, whose protégés are primarily men, or for men providing mentoring assistance to women who are trying to advance their careers. Differing perceptions have the potential to enhance or inhibit this relationship, as well as influence the assessment of a mentor's ability to aid in career development. We found no research indicating which mentoring functions people value in general, let alone how women and men differ on this issue (however, see elsewhere in this volume for research addressing this). The present study is an exploratory first step in understanding what differences may exist in men's and women's perceptions of the importance of what mentors do for protégés.

## Methods

### *Data collection*

As part of a large research project on career development and mentoring, respondents answered several questions about mentoring. The data in this study come from written responses to the open-ended survey question, "In general, what do you personally think are the three most important things that a mentor can do for his or her protégé?". Our goal was to capture as completely as possible a full range of perspectives on what respondents considered important for a mentor to provide to a protégé. Although respondents were asked to provide information on three things, answers that provided fewer or more were included in full. The unit of analysis in our study is the individual, and the focus is on the mentoring behaviors he or she identified as important.

A total of 2,514 surveys were mailed to alumni who had graduated from the MBA program of a northeastern university between 1980 and 1995. Of the potential respondents, 250 were unemployed (e.g. between jobs, raising children full time, attending school full time) and 105 were not contacted because their surveys were returned as undeliverable, leaving a potential sample of 2,159. After two reminders, a total of 783 surveys were returned, yielding a 36 percent response rate. The respondents were predominantly male (70 percent) and ranged in age from 25 to 55 and averaged 35 years. Just over 89 percent were Caucasian, 7 percent were Asian, and the remaining 4 percent were either African American, Hispanic, or indicated another ethnicity. Respondents averaged about four years of work experience with their current employers (ranging from 0 to 21 years), and worked in the fields of finance (27 percent), marketing (26 percent), consulting (21 percent), and operations (5 percent), with the remaining 21 percent distributed among general management, accounting, sales management, human resource management, or other specific job types. Of the returned surveys, 637 provided both the respondents' sex and responses to the open-ended questions on mentoring. Respondents gave one to four narrative responses in answer to each survey question for a total of 2,068 responses, of which 14 percent were omitted due to illegibility, vagueness, or having identified characteristics of mentors rather than behaviors.

### *Data analysis*

The coding scheme was designed to capture a complete range of mentor behaviors that respondents considered important for protégés. Two independent coders assigned each comment to one of 16 mentoring functions based on the schema outlined by O'Neill (1997). The mentoring behaviors and definitions can be seen in the list below, as defined by Kram (1985) and O'Neill (1997). Inter-rater reliability was initially 70 percent; full agreement was subsequently achieved by discussing and resolving each discrepancy. To reduce the potential for bias, the data were coded before the sex of respondents was entered into the database:

- *Acceptance and confirmation*: communicate acceptance, confirmation, respect, adequacy; signal approval, even in times of failure. Examples: praise protégé for good work; be tolerant of mistakes/new ideas; support before protégé has proven self; give sense of belonging and purpose.
- *Appraisal support*: help redefine or reevaluate an external situation as less threatening; focus on a situation's positive aspects. Examples: provide

perspective; help turn failures into learning and boil problems down to fundamentals; help bring out all sides of a situation.

- *Challenging*: design or assign challenging tasks to stretch protégé; increase responsibility, but within ability. Examples: push to excel; provide opportunities to take risks; set “stretch” targets for development; encourage independence; give “room” to learn and make mistakes.
- *Championing behaviors*: publicly advocate a protégé’s abilities, qualities, potential, and competence such as nominating for projects, lateral moves, promotions; advertise protégé’s good qualities; publicly help reputation through marketing/promotion of protégé endorse or assist on behalf of protégé’s career. Examples: suggest name when opportunities arise; cheerleading; manage perception with upper management; help “lobby” for person.
- *Coaching*: improve protégé’s career abilities, perspective, performance; share ideas, provide feedback, suggest specific strategies to help protégé accomplish career goals or get recognition; redirect to more appropriate field. Examples: provide career guidance; help plan to reach goals; plan developmental assignments; provide feedback on behavior and effectiveness.
- *Exposure/visibility behaviors*: expose to others to advance protégé’s career; put in situations where competence, abilities, talents become known. Examples: introduce to the “right” people; open doors for opportunities/promotions; help create/define development opportunities; include in situations not normally available to protégé.
- *Friendship*: interact informally; share/exchange positive affect; extend relationship beyond work; spend leisure or recreation time; discuss variety of experiences. Examples: Be a friend; establish a personal bond; invest in getting to know them personally.
- *Information support*: give advice, suggestions, guidance, directives, and access to information to help understand and cope with various events, especially problematic ones, e.g. help identify a problem. Examples: explain rationale for decisions; provide a different perspective; help understand implications of actions and how to foresee situations; listen as a sounding board.
- *Material support*: provide financial aid or other material resources; instrumental or tangible support (different from task support). Examples: offer new tools; provide access to resources; supply resources to complete your job; make sure getting paid well.
- *Motivation*: motivate to try new things; encourage persistence, reassure that efforts will pay off, help endure frustration, belief they can ride it through. Examples: motivate; encourage; give confidence; inspire – to dream – let imagination soar; offer courage in the tight spots.
- *Personal counseling*: help protégé with non-career issues through psychological and emotional support; give guidance, advice, emotional and personal support through empathy, trust, esteem, assistance with personal life. Examples: listen to personal concerns; help keep balance in life; emotional support in tough situations; moral support; empathize; care about general well-being.

- *Political assistance*: socialize; acquaint with values, customs, resources, and cast of characters; instruct in organizational and professional politics; provide inside tips on appropriate corporate behavior or self-presentation. Examples: explain political landscape and “rules of the road;” provide information about true company hierarchy (not “org. chart”).
- *Protecting behaviors*: act directly or give advice to prevent career harm; intervene in conflicts or controversial situations that endanger advancement; shield from potentially damaging contact with others in firm; act as guardian. Examples: provide “cover” when needed; buffer politics; provide advice, guidance and counsel in potentially career threatening situations; warn of pitfalls.
- *Role modeling*: purposefully exhibit behavior, values, or attitudes to be emulated. Examples: set a strong, professional example; be a good role model; lead by example; visible behaviors in multiple, difficult situations; demonstrate ethical integrity.
- *Status support*: provided by mere existence of the relationship; attributions made about protégé by others; seen as valuable member of the community and having the capacity to work and interact effectively with others. Example: identify themselves as a mentor to the protégé.
- *Training*: on the job teaching, explanations, instructions for specific jobs and work assignments; help resolve work problems, provide needed services. Examples: tutor in required skills; provide insight; advise how to do job successfully; increase business knowledge; “show the ropes.”

## Findings

### *Perceptions of mentoring functions*

Of the mentoring behaviors identified in the responses, the five most frequently listed by respondents as in their top three for importance were:

- (1) Coaching (49 percent).
- (2) Information support (46.3 percent).
- (3) Exposure and visibility (27.8 percent).
- (4) Political assistance (21.8 percent).
- (5) Championing (20.3 percent).

Approximately 12-16 percent of the respondents labeled the following group of mentoring behaviors as most important: protecting, challenging, role modeling, motivating, and training. Personal counseling and friendship were among the six mentoring behaviors listed by the fewest respondents, four of which were identified by only 3 percent or fewer: material support, appraisal support, status support, and acceptance and confirmation.

### *Sex differences in perceptions of mentoring*

Table I shows the distribution of responses identifying perceptions of the most important things mentors can do for their protégés. Comparing the relative frequencies for men and women across the 16 mentoring behavior categories shows that there were differences in only two categories. Women (25 percent) more than men (18 percent)

**Table I.**  
Percentage by sex  
identifying mentoring  
function as one of the  
most important

Mentoring functions	Women <i>n</i> = 192 (%)	Men <i>n</i> = 445 (%)	<i>t</i> -test	Sig.
Coaching (49%)	54	47	-1.548	0.122
Information support (46.3%)	46	46	-0.014	0.989
Exposure/visibility (27.8%)	32	26	-1.475	0.141
Political assistance (21.8%)	26	20	-1.485	0.138
Championing (20.3%)	25	18	-1.962	0.050
Role modelling (15.5%)	14	16	0.676	0.499
Motivation (14.3%)	14	15	0.352	0.725
Training (14.1%)	15	14	-0.216	0.829
Protecting (12.9%)	13	13	0.184	0.854
Challenging (12.2%)	0.9	13	1.452	0.147
Personal counselling (7.2%)	0.6	0.8	0.621	0.535
Friendship (4.6%)	0.4	0.5	0.306	0.759
Material support (2.2%)	1.0	2.7	1.307	0.192
Appraisal support (2.0%)	1.0	2.5	1.171	0.242
Acceptance and confirmation (2.7%)	0.5	0.2	-2.080	0.038
Status support (0.2%)	0	0.2	0.657	0.512

identify championing behaviors as very important ( $t = -1.962, p < 0.05$ ). It was also among the top five mentoring behaviors identified as important, and the implications of this will be discussed below.

A second mentoring behavior, acceptance and confirmation, had significant differences in the percent of women (0.5 percent) and men (0.2 percent) who identified it as one of the three most important behaviors mentors can engage in with protégés ( $t = -2.080, p < 0.05$ ). However, only 17 of the 637 respondents listed acceptance and confirmation as one of the most important that mentors can do for protégés.

### Discussion

This study is the first to consider the difference between men's and women's perceptions of which mentoring behaviors are most important. There were two primary findings that have implications for theory and practice, both of which will be discussed in greater detail below. First, with few exceptions there was relatively little difference between men's and women's perceptions of important mentoring behaviors. Second, some mentoring behaviors commonly identified in extant research were underrepresented by the lists our respondents generated, while other behaviors they identified were not represented in the mentoring literature.

#### *Differences between men and women*

Our data suggest that women and men appear to be more similar than different when it comes to identifying the most important behaviors for mentors to engage in with protégés. A few reasons may account for the similarity in perceptions. First, the men and women sampled went through the same academic socialization processes and may have learned the same values regarding mentors. Second, the sample consists of graduates of a top-tier business school who had self-selected into that male-dominated degree program, thereby suggesting similar profiles irrespective of their sex. Third, women in corporate work environments often develop strategies or adopt accepted

perspectives to succeed (*BusinessWeek*, 1994). In fact, studies have shown that successful managers are perceived as having characteristics more typically associated with men than with women (Brenner *et al.*, 1989; Heilman *et al.*, 1989; Schein, 1975).

The two mentoring behaviors found to be significantly more important to women than to men were championing and acceptance and confirmation. Championing was one of the top five mentoring behaviors identified by both men and women, with women perceiving it as significantly more important than did men. Interestingly, O'Neill's (2002) review of mentoring and gender identified only one study in the last two decades in which women reported having been mentored less than men (Wilson and Reschly, 1995). Why, then, do women more than men perceive championing to be important? First, the public nature of championing, involving a mentor advocating on behalf of a protégé, may be valued by women because they identify it as a critical factor in career success and/or compensation benefits that mentoring can provide. In addition, women may value the public recognition of mentoring more than men because they feel it can help them address the challenges stemming from occupational discrimination, exclusion from male-dominated financial networks, and other existing barriers to developing business skills (Brush, 1994; Powell, 1993; Sekaran and Leong, 1992).

While women found acceptance and confirmation significantly more important than men, respondents did not list it as one of the most important mentoring behaviors; in fact, it was one of the least frequently mentioned categories, along with appraisal support, status support, and material support. This does not tell us these categories are unimportant, but rather that few people listed them as a top mentoring behavior. In fact, the significant difference between men and women suggests that this is indeed an important behavior. While the small percentage of participants identifying this behavior calls for caution in interpreting the difference, the praise and support of this mentoring behavior may be more important to women than to men because of the satisfaction of knowing they are valued by their mentors.

Because of the overall similarity in men's and women's perceptions of important behaviors, mentors or those designing mentoring programs should be careful not to categorize protégés according to traditional sex-role stereotypes. When considering the type of mentoring provided by the mentor, the belief might be that women provide different types of mentoring than men because their behaviors may be a function of their preferences or expectations, or driven by their beliefs about what protégés expect. However, a recent review of mentoring research revealed that protégés receive the same types of mentoring from both male and female mentors (O'Neill, 2002). Similarly, while gender stereotyping assumes men and women behave in different ways and excel in different types of jobs (Hare *et al.*, 1997; Powell *et al.*, 2002), stereotypes do not accurately reflect behavior (O'Neill and Blake-Beard, 2002). Studies of gender differences in management and entrepreneurship, for example, have shown that differences between men and women are reduced when they are called upon to play similar roles in the work environment (Schein and Mueller, 1992).

The finding that the two sexes are more similar than not in the perception of the most valued mentoring behaviors is helpful information for organizations that seek to promote mentoring. First, it clarifies the similarity in the expectations of male and female protégés, thus avoiding inadvertent stereotyping in cross-sex mentoring. It also helps minimize inadvertent bias in the development of formal mentoring programs, as

those who develop such programs need not plan to manage two sets of protégé expectations. Lastly, it is important for men to understand that women value championing more, and men who mentor women need to open a dialogue to head off the possibility of unmet expectations. The same could be said for acceptance and confirmation, though few people identified this mentoring behavior as most important.

*Relative importance of mentoring functions*

The five most identified mentoring behaviors – championing, exposure and visibility, coaching, informational support, and political assistance – are those identified as career types of support by both mentoring and social support scholars (Cohen *et al.*, 1985; House, 1987; Kram, 1985; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Though over 46 percent of the respondents identified information support behaviors as important (e.g. mentors acting as a sounding board for discussing issues, struggles or problems, providing guidance and counseling, sharing their own experiences good and bad, giving advice, and playing the devil’s advocate), this behavior does not stand alone as a category in the typical mentoring behavior framework. This is an example of a mentoring behavior that is clearly important to protégés yet not fully represented in research to date. While other newly introduced categories were not among the most often listed mentoring behavior, we are suggesting that their inclusion can be accounted for with a more nuanced framework that can be developed with additional research.

This research sheds light into the mentoring behaviors that are perceived as most important. Equally important is future research on the effectiveness of different behaviors to provide insights into whether protégés’ perceptions of the most important mentoring behaviors are in fact the ones that produce the most beneficial outcomes. Protégés want mentors who provide “valuable” support, but what they believe to be important may not actually be correlated with real success in that firm. As organizations continue to establish formal mentoring programs (e.g. Armstrong *et al.*, 2002; Raabe and Beehr, 2003), they can use research like this to educate employees as to why these behaviors are the primary components of mentoring training and subsequent relationships. To do so, firms will need to manage employee expectations by internally publicizing the goals, components, and reasoning behind the formal mentoring program. Aligning employee perceptions with what will be offered and what they can hope to gain from participation will help avoid problems of unmet or unrealistic expectations. Educating protégés regarding an array of mentoring behaviors and possible outcomes will also create a demand and appreciation for them. In training mentors (or at minimum providing literature to them), it would be helpful to indicate the range of mentoring behaviors and common expectations held by protégés, and where these diverge from the mentoring behaviors the firm has identified as the most effective in building career success.

*Limitations and future research*

This research was part of a large-scale survey study on career development and mentoring and captured a breadth of expectations of mentors from respondents across a variety of industries, levels of organizational hierarchy, and firms. Though from several different graduating classes, these respondents were all MBA alumni of the same university and are more representative of the well-educated, mostly white business-savvy individual. Thus, caution is urged in generalizing their identification of

important mentoring functions to all other populations. For example, the friendship function was rated as one of the least important behaviors. It is possible the MBA experience developed them into confident, skilled workers in less need of friendship from mentors than colleagues who may have a lower sense of self-efficacy. Given this possibility, an interesting avenue for future research lies in examining perceptions of mentoring behaviors by employees with different educational backgrounds. Similarly, the cultural differences in how men and women value various mentoring behaviors might find greater disparity between the sexes. For example, a study of expatriates who are managers overseas and expected to mentor others, or those working overseas being mentored by locals may find that the sexes expect or value these behaviors differently. It is possible that people from different cultures may not value or recognize the efforts of a mentor, or may feel less valued if they think they are not getting something they believe comes with the job. Cross-sex mentoring may be further complicated in other countries by issues of power distance and communication style – the study of these could provide interesting theoretical and practical insights.

The relative importance reported for various mentoring functions may have other explanations beyond the educational achievements and academic experiences of the sample. An alternative explanation is that the changing work environment has shifted the need for certain functions over others. So whereas status support emerged as the least needed, it may not be peculiar to the sample but a reflection that in an age of boundaryless careers protégés do not feel the need to ride on the coattails of a mentor but instead forge their own reputation. An alternative explanation is that while this may be an important function of a mentor-protégé relationship, survey respondents may not have characterized it as something a mentor does (i.e. an action *per se*), but rather as reflected glory conferred by others in the protégé's social setting. It is possible that some behaviors were not considered the purview of mentors if it was instead believed that relationships outside the work environment could more effectively provide them – such as friendship or personal counseling. While mentors may offer such, there appears to be a perception that they are not one of the most important things that can be done for protégés. Lastly, the emphasis respondents placed on information support, political assistance and on protecting may suggest that complex and/or dysfunctional corporate cultures influence perceptions of the importance of these behaviors if protégés are confused or threatened by workplace intrigues.

An additional limitation of the survey methodology is that respondents reported their perspectives of the three most important things that a mentor can do for his or her protégé, but were not asked to comment directly on what they had experienced. This allowed them to project what they valued or would value most about mentoring onto the question, without limiting themselves to reflecting on one particular mentor or time frame, or various categories of mentoring such as formal vs informal, internal vs external, or supervisory vs non-supervisory. Studies have revealed these categories yield different mentoring functions (Chao *et al.*, 1992; Fagenson-Eland *et al.*, 1997; Ragins and Cotton, 1999), so future research may be needed to determine if the importance assigned to certain behaviors differs depending on who one's mentor is. If, as we argue, unfilled expectations of a mentor affect the protégé and the mentoring relationship, it would be important to discern the behavioral expectations associated with different types of mentors.

Existing studies typically have examined either overall mentoring or broad categories of mentoring that were established in early theorizing about the subject (e.g. Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992). However, understanding the degree to which specific mentoring behaviors are provided, as well as their range or comprehensiveness, is an important factor in understanding these relationships (Clawson, 1980; Hunt and Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988a, b). Research has only begun to examine details such as the influence of organizational factors on specific mentoring behaviors (O'Neill, n.d.). Similarly, there is a need to identify which functions have the most causal impact on career and personal outcomes. Finally, future research in these areas should include longitudinal career studies of mentoring with a goal of identifying the most effective mentoring behaviors for men and women.

### Conclusion

An organization that invests in a mentoring program wants both actual results and employee support for the program. The first is a simple desire for return on investment (ROI) and the development of future leaders and star performers. The second is a subtle need – for without employee acceptance of and participation in the mentoring program, it will have minimal impact on career development. Firms can best achieve convergence between what employees value in mentoring relationships and what they get by focusing their efforts to train mentors and design programs that educate them about the range and effectiveness of various mentoring behaviors. The findings here extend existing research by first asking men and women to generate a list of what they perceive to be the three most important mentoring behaviors and then showing that, for MBAs at least, there is little difference across the sexes.

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