What Good Is Bad Mentorship? Protégé's Perception of Negative Mentoring Experiences

Payal Kumar & Stacy Blake-Beard

Scholars have only recently begun to study the darker side of mentoring. Covering virtually unchartered terrain, this paper draws on the social exchange theory and the interdependence theory to study whether negative mentoring experiences can be perceived by protégés as a double-sided coin—with both costs and benefits. Also, this paper examines whether some protégés are more inclined to negative mentoring experiences than the others. Reasons for why this study has important implications for protégés and organizations are suggested, and also future areas of study are demarcated.

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Introduction

Mentorship dates back to ancient Greek mythology: Ulysses departed for the Trojan War only after entrusting his son Telemachus to his trusted friend Mentor, who was in fact Goddess Athena in disguise (Tickle, 1993). While the practice of mentorship is ancient, the word "mentor" meaning a trusted counselor or guide, was popularized by Francis Fenelon in his 1699 book, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*.

The predominant focus of contemporary management research on mentoring has been on "outcome or criterion variables" (Scandura & Pellegrini, 2007: 7), more specifically as a positive experience for the protégé, the mentor, and the organization. For the protégé, mentoring is said to induce the feeling of having more power (Fagenson, 1988), greater job satisfaction (Fagenson, 1992), an accelerated learning curve (Eby & Lockwood, 2005), better promotion prospects and salary (Scandura, 1992; Ragins & Scandura, 1999), a reduction in stress (Blake-Beard, 2003), an affirmation of self-worth (Gibson, 2004), and better socialization (Johnson, 2007).

Mentorship is also said to be beneficial for the mentor in that he is able to leave behind a legacy to a new generation of employees (Erikson, 1963), he is able to use his knowledge productively in order to assist the protégé (Levinson, 1978), he receives gratification from peer recognition and gains loyal supporters (Vincent & Seymour, 1995, Eby & Lockwood, 2005), and that for female mentors, mentorship may facilitate career progress by breaking the glass ceiling (Parker & Kram, 1993).

For the organization, the advantages are said to include the transmission of corporate culture and sense-making (Wilson & Elman, 1990), helping to redefine the organizational culture in times of crisis (Wilson & Elman, 1990), the creation of equal opportunity for all executives (Heery, 1994) and improved organizational communication (Singh, Bains & Vinnicombe, 2002). Other advantages include a smoother transition in the merging of two organizational cultures (Forret, Turban & Dougherty, 1996); the transference of knowledge, skills, and political connections (Sosik & Lee, 2002); an enhanced socialization of new employees (Singh et al., 2002); and the early identification of upcoming leaders (Perrone, 2003).

So while the scholarship so far had been skewed towards the positive outcome variables of mentoring for the protégé, mentor, and the organization, there are fewer studies pertaining to the darker side of mentoring. It was Kram's (1985) pioneering study that raised the possibility of destructiveness in mentoring relationships. Since then, a few studies on the negative and dysfunctional mentoring experiences have emerged, some from the mentor's perspective (Eby et al., 2008) and others from the protégé's perspective (Eby & McManus, 2004).

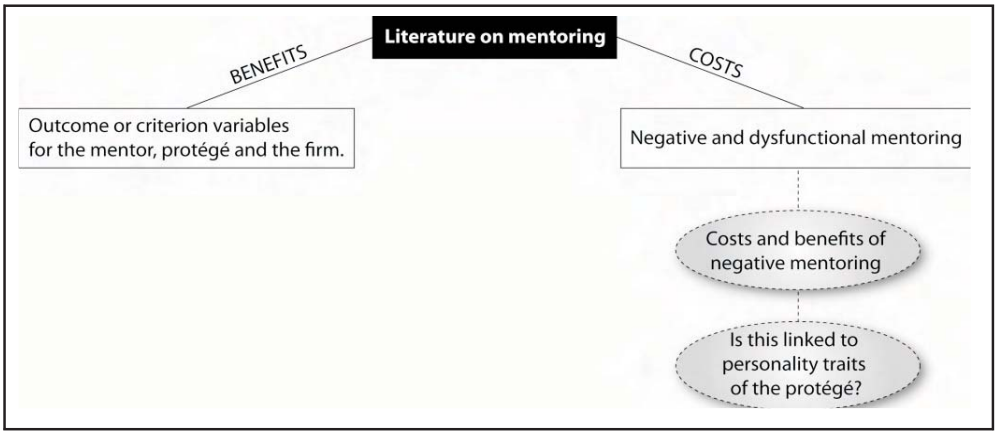
The consequences of negative mentoring for the protégé can be far-reaching leading to personal damage.

There are several reasons why it is imperative for researchers to delve deeper into understanding the darker side of mentoring. First, it is suggested that negative events have more of an impact on an individual than positive events (Baumeister et al., 2001), so much so that with regard to leadership, followers tend to recall negative events more than positive ones (Dasborough, 2006). Also, the consequences of negative mentoring for the protégé can be far-reaching leading to personal damage (O'Neill & Sankowsky, 2001). Negative mentoring can lead to a protégé cloning himself in the image of the mentor (Ragins & Scandura, 1997), or can lead to ingratiatory behavior (Scandura, 1998), to physical withdrawal in terms of absenteeism or turnover, loss of valuable career time and a sense of betrayal (Feldman, 1999) or can lead to decreased job satisfaction and increase in stress (Scandura, 1998; Eby & Allen, 2002).

The scope of this paper is limited to the negative mentoring experiences,

which may not necessarily lead to failure of the mentor–protégé relationship (Eby et al., 2000). This is to be distinguished from dysfunctional mentorship, in which the relationship fails to work for either the mentor or the protégé, or which leads to distress for both (Scandura, 1998). The thrust of the literature on negative mentoring so far has been on the cost incurred for either the protégé or the mentor or the firm. In this paper, drawing on the social exchange theory which posits that relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost–benefit analysis, we look into the possibility of negative mentoring experiences being a double-sided coin for protégés—with both costs and benefits—a perspective which is virtually an unchartered terrain in the literature. This construct evolves from studies that suggest that individual learning can occur following major life crises such as divorce and physical illness (Schaefer & Moos, 1992) (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The Literature Gap



It has been suggested that research be conducted in this area: "It is also recommended that researchers examine the possibility that mentoring relationships that are viewed by mentors or protégés as 'high cost', may be viewed later on as positive growth experiences" (Eby, 2007: 339). Also in this paper, taking a cue from Feldman (1999) who studied the likelihood of destructive personality traits of protégés, suggesting that protégés as much as mentors may contribute to dysfunctional outcomes, we examine whether some protégés are more inclined to negative mentoring experiences than others. Thus the two research questions stemming from literature gaps are:

1. Are there any benefits of negative mentoring experiences for protégés?
2. Are some protégés more inclined to negative mentoring experiences than others?

Operationalization of Terms

Instead of Levinson's (1978) rather broad definition of a mentor, which in-

cludes even an author of a book who may influence an individual, we shall be using the traditional definition in which the mentor is higher up in hierarchy than the protégé, with the former providing the latter with career and personal guidance (Kram, 1985).

While Kram's dissertation was based on 22 informal mentoring pairs in which the goals evolve over time, we shall be using the framework of formal mentoring in which the mentor and protégé are assigned to work together, usually for a specified amount of time, say a year, with set goals (Blake-Beard, 2001). It is important to distinguish between the two types of mentoring relationships since they evolve differently and so the outcomes could also be different (Ragins & Cotton, 1991).

The literature refers to negative mentoring experiences, or "negative asymmetry" (Labianca & Brass, 2006: 597), as those experiences that may not necessarily sound the death knell for mentoring relationships, but rather may range from minor to more severe (Eby et al., 2000). So, while negative mentoring experiences imply an ineffective relationship in which there is no mala fide intention, dysfunctional mentoring in contrast can damage the protégé not only in terms of negative personal interactions (Eby & McManus, 2004), but also in terms of goal attainment (O'Neill & Sankowsky, 2001). It is to be noted that the literature often covers both negative and dysfunctional mentoring together.

The Outcome

Duff (1999) maps out the four potential dysfunctions in mentoring relationships, namely, negative relations, sabotage, difficulty and spoiling (betrayal, regret). Building on this, there are five major studies on negative and dysfunctional mentoring experiences, three theoretical and two empirical, as follows:

1. Scandura (1998) suggests that while dysfunctional mentoring is a low base phenomenon (i.e., poor relationships occur less frequently than good relationships), the actual consequences of this type of mentoring in terms of personal damage could be quite serious.
2. Feldman's (1999) theoretical paper suggests that protégés, and not just mentors, contribute to dysfunctional outcomes, and that both are hurt by these toxic relationships.
3. The empirical study of negative mentoring from the perspective of the protégés by Eby and McManus (2004) suggests how typical the negative experience was related positively to its perceived impact on the relationship.
4. Eby et al. (2000) developed a multilevel taxonomy of negative mentoring experiences. The most frequently reported negative experience was said to be due to mismatches within the dyad between values, work styles, and personality.
5. O'Neill and Sankowsky (2001) present three typical protégé re-

sponses to theoretical abuse and discuss the psychological consequences for the protégé.

Apart from these, scholars have also studied the construct from various theoretical frameworks. The classical model by Kram (1985) defines mentoring to be single, dyadic, and hierarchical. New theoretical models that have emerged since Kram's model, in which mentoring is not defined as narrowly, but rather as a relationship in which the mentor guides a protégé, who, in turn, mentors other team members (Williams, 2000); or in which there is multiple mentoring of one protégé at a single point in time (Higgins & Kram, 2001); or a collective model in which a group with members that have similar interests is mentored (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003).

This wider lense reaffirms social exchange theory that posits that relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost–benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. Interdependence theory takes this one stage further by looking at how commensurate these costs and rewards are to peoples' expectations of relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Drawing upon these theories, in which the cost-benefit ratio of a relationship has a direct impact on the satisfaction of the relationship (Ragins & Kram, 2007: 334), we ask whether negative mentoring relationships consist only of costs, as the prevailing literature seems to suggest, or of benefits too.

Building upon this literature, we conducted a series of open-ended interviews with five employees working in one organization in the media industry. Qualitative research usually works with small samples of people, in which the samples are purposive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Given that it is difficult to locate employees who may have had negative mentoring experiences, the snowball sampling technique was used which led to some respondents sharing information about other respondents from their acquaintances, in order to build up sufficient data (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). These employees were asked whether they had perceived any benefit from a negative mentoring experience, and then a content analysis was conducted independently by two research assistants. The inter-rater reliability, or interobserver reliability, a useful evaluation tool (Krippendorff, 2004) by the two coders had an inter-rater reliability of 87 percent.

Based on this pilot qualitative study, listed below are some possible benefits of negative mentoring experiences:

1. The protégé may seek better opportunities in either another department or in another organization.
2. It may lead to greater introspection by the protégé about his goals, his skills, and the means by which to achieve growth in his organization or another organization.
3. The protégé may seek other avenues for growth in terms of further skill enhancement (inside or outside the organization), in terms of training programs or opting to obtain a degree or diploma at the higher education level.

4. The protégé may learn how to cope better in stressful situations. One respondent said:

   "As a result of a negative mentoring experience with a particularly toxic mentor, I quit my organization and moved on, but this certainly developed in me the ability to say no to the higher up in the organizational hierarchy and not be treated like a doormat (open-ended interview by the first author on November 25, 2011).

5. Mentoring has been positively associated with protégé's willingness to mentor others in the future (Chun et.al, 2010). Rather than imitating the mentor, the protégé may react by specifically not indulging in negative mentorship when he himself dons a mentorship role.

6. Studies already suggest that emotionally intelligent mentors and protégés are able to accurately perceive and regulate relationships in such a way as to prevent harmful effects of the mentoring process (Bowles & Flynn, 2010). Negative mentoring experiences may lead to a greater development of emotional quotient in the protégé. This draws on the self-perception theory that posits that people develop attitudes by observing behavior and reflecting on what attitudes would have caused this.

7. Given that mentoring is said to be useful throughout one's career at different stages (Gibson, 2004), negative mentoring experiences may help the protégé select a better mentor in the future.

8. The protégé may seek to build upon the support network of others, for example from peer mentors, and also draw on self mentoring resources (Darling, 1985).

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Based on these exploratory interviews and upon the literature, the following hypothesis was developed:

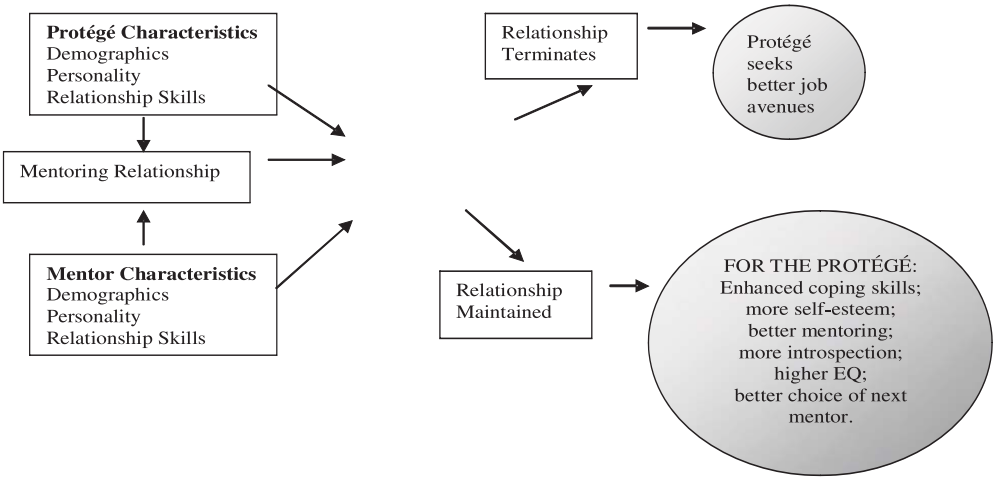
Hypothesis 1: Negative mentoring experiences for protégés are positively associated with coping strategies in the workplace.

Taking these possible outcomes into consideration, a new dimension has been added to Scandura's (1998) model on dysfunctional mentoring relationships (highlighted in shaded region in Fig. 2).

Protégé's Response

With regard to personality traits, there have been studies on the traits of a dysfunctional mentor, but few studies on the traits of a dysfunctional (or functional) protégé. Some of the traits of a negative or dysfunctional mentor include being inaccessible to the protégé, using bullying tactics, being jealous, or feeling threat-

Fig.2: Scandura's Model on Dysfunctional Mentoring Relationships



Source: Based on Scandura (1998).

ened by the ability of his protégé (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Ragins & Scandura, 1997); being possessive or having an overt controlling tendency, being vindictive and impatient. He may also take undue credit for a protégé's work, have poor relationship skills and impose his own sensemaking, which takes on the form of theoretical abuse (O'Neill & Sankowsky, 2001).

Protégés are likely to also react differently to negative mentoring experiences.

There are studies that suggest that protégés respond differently to mentoring (Allen & Eby, 2003). It is therefore logical to presume that protégés are likely to also react differently to negative mentoring experiences. Surprisingly, while no major study has been conducted on how protégés may respond differently to negative mentoring experiences according to personality traits/types, scholars have acknowledged the need to investigate the varied protégé responses to negative mentoring.

It has been suggested that a protégé may have self-serving behavior, in which he is motivated to obtain mentoring, not to further his career but to thwart another employee's chances of obtaining mentoring (Eby & McManus, 2004: 258). Other studies suggest that it is protégés with higher self efficacy that are more likely to be motivated to participate in a mentor-protégé relationship (Noe, 1987; 1988). Furthermore, high protégé IQ is associated with the protégé being more likely to initiate mentoring relationships and also more likely to engage in more self-monitoring (Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Also, internal locus of control, high self-monitoring, and high emotional stability are said to have an indirect influ-

ence on career achievement by influencing both the initiation of mentoring and the mentoring received (Turban & Dougherty, 1994).

Based on this literature review, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

Hypothesis 2: Negative mentoring costs are positively associated with protégés low on emotional intelligence.

Hypothesis 3: Negative mentoring benefits are positively associated with protégés high on emotional intelligence.

Using the five-factor personality model, Labianca and Brass (2006) suggest that two personality factors, viz. Negative Affectivity (NA) and Conscientiousness can affect organizational attachment. Mentors might be more likely to report on performance problems if the protégé is lower on conscientiousness (Eby et al., 2008). Also, career and psychosocial mentoring were found to be highest for protégés and mentors who were high in learning goal orientation (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). This leads to the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: Negative mentoring costs are positively associated with protégés high on negative affectivity.

Hypothesis 5: Negative mentoring benefits are positively associated with protégés low on negative affectivity.

There are also studies that suggest that successful protégés are those who have the need for affiliation and achievement (Fagenson, 1992); have the willingness to be mentored (Ragins & Scandura, 1999); are more likeable and trustworthy than others (Feldman, 1999); and tend to be individuals with the personality characteristics that include extraversion and Type A personality (Aryee et al., 1999). This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6: Negative mentoring costs are positively associated with protégés low on internal locus.

Hypothesis 7: Negative mentoring benefits are positively associated with protégés high on internal locus.

Eby et al. (2000), in a study that developed a taxonomy of negative mentoring experiences, suggest that further research is needed to examine characteristics of mentors and protégés who are susceptible to negative mentoring experiences. We suggest that for a more complete picture, one needs to delve further and also examine characteristics like extraversion, type A personality, negative affectivity, and conscientiousness, in order to ascertain whether some protégés are more likely to report costs and benefits of negative mentoring experiences, rather than costs only.

Negative Mentoring Experiences

As there is not enough literature on the possible benefits for protégés at the receiving end of negative experiences and also on some protégés possibly being more inclined to negative mentoring experiences, any study taking these re-

search questions forward would be inductive and exploratory in nature in order to derive an assessment that could be a precursor for theory building (Weick, 1995).

To investigate these research questions further we suggest a qualitative approach which seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific, real-world settings based on the belief that there is no one singular universal reality (Cutliffe & McKenna, 1999; Healy & Perry, 2000; Kram & Ragins, 2007); and where the researcher does not manipulate the phenomenon of interest by means of prediction and generalization of findings (Golafshani, 2003). One could, for example, look at why and under what conditions the outcome of negative mentoring experiences may be perceived as a benefit, and build up a taxonomy of positive outcomes of negative mentoring experiences on the basis of the content analysis of interviews of protégés. Or one could ascertain the percentage of protégés reporting some possible benefit from negative mentoring experiences.

Reverse Causality

Kram (1983) mentions four phases of the mentor relationship, namely, initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. In the period of separation, she suggests that when the young manager exhibits the ability to manage certain job skills independently, this demonstrates that the mentor has been successful in developing new talent.

However, we suggest that further research could be taken up on what some scholars suggest to be a reverse causality in terms of the protégé's superior skills. It may not be a good mentor who is responsible for a positive mentoring experience, but that it could be due to a high performing protégé, in the same way that a brilliant student may excel in spite of being tutored by quite an average teacher (Green & Bauer, 1995). Feldman (1999) too suggests that perhaps it is not mentors that 'create' good protégés but rather that it is the protégés with high technical competence and skills that attract the best mentors.

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Women & Mentoring

Existing studies have shown that there are gender differences when it comes to mentoring: Ragins and Cotton (1999) suggest that female protégés who had male mentors received more promotions but less compensation than their male counterparts. Female proteges are also perceived as having fewer mentors than men, as being more dependent on the relationship and holding onto the relationship past its usefulness (Ragins, 1989).

Men and women have different definitions of career success in terms of extrinsic and intrinsic values.

We suggest that building on the foundation of studies that have shown that men and women have different definitions of career success in terms of extrinsic and intrinsic values (Van Emmerik, 2004), and thus may seek different benefits from their mentoring relationship, that studies on mentorship ought to be conducted from a gendered perspective.

Gendered scholarship consists of a multitude of narratives that have challenged existing epistemology, particularly the traditional binary thinking of scholars (Kumar & Varshney, 2012), and it is in this context that the theoretical lens of the Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory seems to be the most appropriate for future studies on women and mentoring, as it is based on the feminine model that human growth occurs through relational connections with others (Miller, 1976), rather a masculine model which considers the relationship from an instrumental perspective (Ragins & Verbos, 2007).

Discussion

While we are evidently not suggesting that negative mentoring is a "good thing," it is certainly important to develop this exploratory study on negative mentorship for the following reasons:-

1. Current research on the positive aspects of mentorship is only one side of the story (Eby et al., 2000), which may create a distorted impression of negative mentoring experiences as aberrations. The literature on positive outcome or criterion variables are far removed from the social exchange theory (Hormans, 1958) that posits that relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost–benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives, and that the relationships may not always be positive (Eby, Butts, Lockwood & Simon, 2004). It is possible, for example, that a protégé may chose not to terminate a negative mentoring relationship, if he is deriving some significant positive aspect from the mentorship.
2. Our study questions the assumption by the existing studies that suggest negative emotions lead only to negative consequences (Gardner et al, 2009).
3. Another reason to study this domain is that a few studies have been conducted that suggest that there is a predicative value of negative mentoring. Eby et al. (2004) suggest that negative mentoring had explanatory power in predicting protégé outcomes over and above positive mentoring; while Bruk and Eby (2010) suggest that several types of negative mentoring experiences predict intentions to leave the relationship.
4. Finally, scholarship in this area may contribute to possible theory building, which has been limited so far. The social exchange theory would help a practitioner understand why a protégé in a negative mentoring relationship may not seek a termination of this relationship, given that the alternative could be no mentoring at all.

Further research in this domain would have the following far-reaching implications for practitioners:

1. To the extent that, as the perceived impact of the negative experience increases, the relationship satisfaction decreases (Eby, 2004), a study of this area is meaningful for practitioners to be able to understand ways in which negative mentoring experience can be avoided at the workplace by adequately matching mentors and protégés in formal mentoring schemes.

2. That there are possible benefits as well as costs of negative mentoring experiences would give practitioners a better understanding of why some protégés may continue in a negative mentoring relationship (if the benefits outweigh the costs). Further training of human resource executives could ensure that negative mentoring experiences for the protege in the workplace do not deteriorate and turn into traumatic dysfunctional mentoring experiences, which may lead to attrition.

3. That some protégés may develop better coping strategies or high emotional intelligence while in a negative mentoring relationship, would help human resource executives understand how some protégés are able to rise in terms of performance in spite of a negative mentoring relationship.

4. A better understanding of personality traits could aid in the selection of an employee as a possible protégé, given that mentoring may not be beneficial for everybody (Eby et al., 2004).

To sum up, this understudied domain of negative mentor–protégé relationships is vital for us to be able to comprehend employee behavior better, given that frequent negative mentoring occurrences in an organization tend to mitigate the development of trust (Jones & George, 1998), which could have far-reaching (avoidable) consequences for the protégé, the mentor, and the organization.

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