

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF INDUSTRY MENTORS IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

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—Abstract—

Framingham State University is located outside Boston, Massachusetts in the US; it offers liberal arts and sciences programs as well as professional education at the undergraduate and graduate levels. A pilot undergraduate mentorship program invited local industry professionals to campus to mentor undergraduate students. The experiences of participants in the pilot program appear to reveal differences in expectations about the benefits of the program and the functions of the industry mentors. The mentoring process at the university level includes three constituencies: university students, academic professionals and industry professionals. A preliminary review of the literature suggests mentor functions can fall into two categories: providing emotional support (encouragement) and facilitating career development. Based upon additional information derived from student focus groups and piloting interviews, the perception of the functions of industry mentors in an undergraduate mentor program was assessed. Data were collected using a survey that addressed three categories of mentor functions: (1) preparing students for the job search (e.g., providing insight into specific jobs, advising about interviewing and resumes), (2) providing emotional support

(encouragement) and (3) modeling professional behavior or skills (e.g., communication skills). The data from surveys were compared across the three groups (students, faculty and staff, and industry professionals) and by gender groups. Results suggest differences in expectations of mentor roles held by women as compared to those held by men. In addition, results suggested that students may have different mentoring expectations than academic faculty. These findings are discussed in light of the needs for female undergraduate mentoring experiences for students majoring in business, and the mismatch of student and faculty perceptions in undergraduate business programs.

Key Words: *gender, mentoring, human capital*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the workplace, mentoring refers to a mutually beneficial relationship between a senior member of an organization and a more junior member (Kram, 1988). The mentor has more power and influence within the organization and can offer the protégé organizational advantages, such as access to career-enhancing assignments, visibility or protection, as well as advice and knowledge (Dreher & Cox, 1996). From an organizational perspective, mentoring can assist in the socialization of new employees, which should result in increased organizational commitment and performance. Individually, mentoring provides benefits to both parties, although more studies have looked at the benefits to the junior member, or protégé (Ibid.). Generally, the functions of mentoring comprise career development, psychosocial support and role modeling. These functions and opportunities for women have been the topic of recent research.

Mentoring studies have compared cross-gender mentor-protégé dyads to same-gender dyads, or compared the experiences of male protégés to those of female protégés. Most studies find that organizations have proportionately fewer females in positions of power, resulting in fewer female mentors (Dreher & Cox, 1996). Studies using cross-gender dyads therefore include many more dyads with male mentors and female protégés than the reverse. Other research comparing the outcomes or benefits resulting from mentorship found differences for female protégés overall in that that male protégés tend to have higher benefits in terms of compensation than have female protégés; the benefits of increased job satisfaction seem to be the same for both groups. The reasons for the gender differences in

benefits have been explained as resulting from the dissimilarity between mentor and protégé within a cross-gender dyad. The same differences in benefits are expected in all cases in which the mentor and protégé belong to different social groups, not only in the case of gender difference.

In this view, the dissimilarity does not necessarily evidence actual cognitive differences; Feldman, Folks & Turnley (1999) argue the identity diversity itself reduces the effectiveness of the mentoring experience because it produces discomfort for both parties, inhibits trust and weakens psychosocial functions. This explanation suggests perceptions about differences, rather than any real differences due to gender, inhibit the mentoring relationship in terms of psychosocial support. External factors, such as potential misperceptions of the cross-gender relationship, are also blamed. Previous studies have examined outcomes based on actual dyadic mentoring relationships; our study examined perceptions about the role or function of mentors independent of participation in a dyad. Our study compared expectations of mentors' roles from three perspectives; the industry professional functioning as a mentor to undergraduate students, the undergraduate students and the university professionals, including faculty and support staff. To make these comparisons on perceptions of mentor roles by gender, our sample included an equal number of men and women.

2. MENTORING FUNCTIONS AND OUTCOMES

Mentoring is a developmental relationship (Dreher & Cox, 1996) which provides two general functions of career advancement and psychosocial support (Kram, 1988); both functions are interrelated (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Career support includes sponsorship, opportunity, exposure, protection and coaching (Dreher & Cox, 1996; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Psychosocial functions are defined as acceptance and confirmation, role modelling, counselling and friendship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), as well as providing the protégé with a positive self-image (Dreher & Cox, 1996). Mentors provide learning and develop the protégé's self-esteem and work identity (Allen, et al., 2004). The mentor can provide entry into important social networks and supports learning through modelling and reinforcement of behaviour (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Lankau & Scandura, 2002).

We applied the mentor model to a program in which industry professionals advised undergraduate business students about careers and professions to identify expected mentoring functions in the professional-student model. Student participation had been low in the mentoring program on campus, which led us to

suspect student expectation of the mentor roles might differ from those of faculty and mentors. We mapped three mentoring functions to the professional-student model. We expected interaction between industry mentors and student protégés would prepare student protégés for their job search in the place of the career advancement function. Some mentoring studies measure role modelling separately from the other psychosocial functions; our study followed this approach to create two constructs for psychosocial functions; one for role modelling and the other for emotional support. Mentoring in the professional-student model includes psychosocial functions much like those in the workplace; industry mentors role model professional behaviour and encourage students to develop identities as nascent professionals within the field.

In addition to studies of mentoring functions, research examines mentoring outcomes or benefits for the protégé. Research on mentoring tends to identify two types of outcomes; objective career outcomes, such as salary and promotions, and subjective outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment (Allen, et al., 2004). In practice, mentoring appears to influence subjective outcomes more strongly than objective outcomes. (Ibid.). Several studies examine whether mentoring outcomes differ between classes of protégés (Allen, et al., 2004; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Dreher & Cox, 1996; Feldman, Folks & Turnley, 1999; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins & Scandura, 1994; Tharenou, 2005).

3. MENTORING AND GENDER

In examining objective outcomes, female protégés are less likely to realize salary increases from mentoring than are male protégés (Dreher & Ash, 1990). A 1996 study of mentoring noted that mentors who were white men in general provided more career opportunities for their protégés, because these mentors were more likely to have positions of power (Dreher & Cox, 1996). The study found that although white male protégés were more likely than women or non-whites to have white male protégés, the statistical analysis of the relationship of mentoring to protégé compensation found no interactions from race or gender variables. Although the mentoring outcomes for protégés who had white male mentors included higher objective benefits in terms of compensation, they did not have higher psychosocial benefits (Ibid.).

Female protégés are more likely than male protégés to experience barriers such as lack of access to information networks, stereotyping and reliance on inappropriate

power bases (Noe, 1988, Ragins & Cotton, 1999). While stereotypically, women are expected to form strong relationships in general, with respect to mentoring, women face more barriers to forming mentor relationships (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). The source of these barriers may lie in the dissimilarity between men and women in their expectations of mentor roles.

4. GENDER, COGNITIVE DIVERSITY AND GROUPS

While gender differences with respect to benefits and outcomes from mentoring have been found, gender is socially constructed and therefore may be shaped by organizational culture as well as the external environment, and internalized to shape the individual's attitudes and expectations. Individuals form their gender identity as a result of interaction with other individuals and social groups (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Gender is one component of identity diversity, the collection of innate and acquired characteristics which make individual persons different and distinctive from each other (Randel & Jaussi, 2003). Identity diversity is associated with cognitive diversity, such as different interpretations or perceptions of phenomena, which can lead to different approaches to problem-solving (Page, 2007). Recent research on group intelligence or performance finds that diverse groups are more likely to lead to innovation or to solve complex problems than will homogeneous groups of more highly skilled individuals (Page, 2007). Organizations can benefit from increased identity and cognitive diversity within its workforce if the organizational culture and practices support participation of individuals from the minority group. One mechanism for increased diversity and the benefits therefrom is the inclusion of greater numbers of women at all levels of the organization.

Women can be considered members of a minority group within most business organizations. Historically, gender is significant in the workplace because it is generally linked with power; gender categories and enactment are products of power relations (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Individuals in cross-gender mentor and protégé dyads are likely to be aware at some level of identity diversity. Previous studies of these relationships assume the dissimilarity leads to discomfort. Although both career advancement and psychosocial functions are interrelated, psychosocial functions are more dependent upon the quality of the interpersonal relationship and emotional bond (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Studies which identify reduced outcomes for female protégés also note that these protégés are overwhelmingly more likely to have male mentors, simply because relatively few

women have the organizational power and position to be effective mentors. Reduced mentoring outcomes for female protégés are attributed to discomfort arising from dissimilarity, rather than any cognitive differences in the female protégés as a group.

The role of gender in the mentoring relationship is dynamic and complex. Ragins and Cotton (1999) compared the type of mentoring relationship as either formal or informal with whether the dyad was same- or cross-gender. The results suggest the effect of gender in mentoring is fairly complex in that it “not only influenced mentoring functions and outcomes” but also moderated the relationships of other factors, such as relationship type and assignment type (Ragins & Cotton, 1999, p. 545). Our research question considers whether cognitive differences between men and women result in different perceptions or expectations of the mentor’s roles, and that the resulting incongruence between the protégé’s and mentor’s expectations reduces the psychosocial benefits for female protégés.

5. METHOD

5.1 Participants

The original convenience sample of 280 participants (140 women) included 40 university professionals, 40 industry professionals and 200 students, primarily undergraduates.

A subsample of undergraduates was randomly selected such that a proper comparison could be made among the mentors, faculty, and student perceptions. The subsample of participants included 46 undergraduates (25 women), 38 faculty/academic professionals (19 women) and 42 mentors/industry professionals (21 women). Students and faculty were recruited from a small New England liberal arts university with mentors recruited from industry in the local area. Student participants ranged from full-time non-working status, to full time student status/full time working status with over 63% reporting upperclassmen status. Faculty and Academic professionals reported an average of 14.3 years working experience and mentors reported an average of 15 years working experience.

5.2 Measures

Based on previous literature, a 19 item measure was developed that assessed perceptions of mentor roles in three areas: providing job search skills, providing emotional support, and modeling professional behavior. The three subscales were

subjected to reliability analyses and yielded modest Chronbach's alphas of .53 for job search, .63 for emotional support, and .72 for modeling professional behavior. Items were rated on a 4 point likert type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Summary scores were computed for each subscale such that higher scores reflected greater agreement with the specific roles of a mentor in each of the three areas.

In addition, all participants provided information about their gender, work status, and years of work experience. Students also provided their student classification status.

5.3 Procedure

Student participants were solicited from a variety of campus locations including the commuter café, library, and classrooms. After obtaining informed consent participants completed the survey and returned it to the researcher. Professional mentors were recruited by the class instructor from local industry professionals. After completing an informed consent they completed the same survey. Finally academic professionals including staff and faculty were asked to complete the informed consent and survey in the same manner. All participants were assured that their answers would be confidential and anonymous.

6. RESULTS

To examine directly, differences in perceptions of mentoring functions by Gender, data for the entire sample of 280 participants (140 men) was subjected to three independent t-tests computed using the summary scores for job searching skills, emotional support, and modeling professional behavior as dependent variables. The t-test for modeling professional behavior yielded a significant result $t(278) = -2.94, p = .03$. Means were 21.95 for men and 22.81 for women. The t-test for using emotional support as a dependent measure also yielded significant findings, $t(278) = -.330, p = .001$. Means were 17.84 for men and 18.94 for women. The t-test using job searching skills as a dependent measure did not yield significant results, $t(278) = .236, p = .628$. Means were 18.89 for men and 19.28 for women.

In order to test differences in perceptions of the three groups, students, faculty and mentors, a random sample of 46 students (24 women) was taken from the complete sample to allow for comparisons of relatively equal numbers of faculty and mentors. Based on this smaller sample we examined differences in the three groups.

To examine potential differences in and interactions of perceptions of mentoring roles, a total of three 2 (GENDER; male,female) X 2 (STATUS; student, faculty, industry professional) ANOVA's were computed using the summary score for job searching skills, emotional support, and modeling professional behavior as dependent measures. The ANOVA's examining the perceptions of emotional support and modeling professional behavior yielded non-significant findings for all main effects and interactions.

The ANOVA examining perceptions of mentoring with respect to job searching skills yielded a significant main effect for STATUS , $F(2,120) = 3.48$, $MSE = 6.98$, $p = .03$. Means were 19.61 (sd 2.19), 18.13 (sd= 2.64) and 18.89 (sd = 2.67) for students, faculty, and industry professionals, respectively. Bonferonni's t was then computed to determine the significant differences among the groups and yielded only a significant difference between students and faculty on this subscale.

7. DISCUSSION

Results from our full sample suggest gender differences in expectations about the role of mentors relative to emotional support and role modeling. It is clear from our findings that women do hold different perceptions about the role of mentors in the areas of emotional support and modeling professional behavior than do men, regardless of status (i.e., student, faculty, professional). Women appear to expect greater mentoring in these areas than do men. On the other hand they seem comfortable with the level of mentoring provided for job searching, in fact on par with men.

When we looked at the smaller sample to compare across status groups and gender, we found only that students and faculty disagreed on the nature of the role of the mentor for job searching skills. Students believed that mentors should provide more support in this area than did faculty. Industry professionals held similar expectations to both groups.

8. CONCLUSION

Sally Blount, dean of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University since 2010, notes a decline in the number of women students pursuing MBA programs in the US, unlike relatively high participation by women in law and medical schools. It appears, in the US at least, that fewer women choose to prepare as students for roles in business, and many women who entered business

careers in the past ten to twenty years encounter barriers to participation and opportunities for career advancement. Results from our study suggest cognitive and attitude differences between men and women could shape different expectations of the psychosocial benefits provided by participation in business organizations. Although socialization in a business organization might diminish those gender differences over time, either due to attrition or modification of women's perceptions, the differences appear to persist among women who have yet to enter business organizations. Understanding those differences could enhance the ability to attract women to business programs and to gain their full participation in business organizations thereby increasing cognitive diversity that can support innovation and knowledge creation.

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