

## **Initial Mentor Attraction: Interactions of Individual and Mentor Demographic Characteristics**

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*Mentoring relationships are frequently used as tools to increase employee productivity. However, little is understood in how to best pair mentors and protégés in formal mentoring programs. This study examined the extent to which individual demographic and dispositional variables interact with various mentor characteristics to predict ratings of the profiles of those mentors. The results of this study are consistent with the notion that gender, race, and similarity of mentors and protégés may be an important consideration when the protégé believes that psychosocial support functions are valuable. This article aims to provide some guidance in regards to overseeing mentoring relationships.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

To date, there has been a great deal of research aimed at attempting to understand the factors that lead one individual to be attracted to another. However, there is little knowledge regarding the various characteristics that compel individuals to be attracted to specific types of mentors. One thing that has been found is that different types of mentoring relationships come about in different ways. For example, in informal mentoring relationships, protégés will seek out a mentor whom they feel has qualities and/or skills that might be beneficial to themselves. On the other hand, in formal relationships, where a mentor and protégé are paired together by a third party, initial attraction to the mentor may lead to the initial success of the relationship. Thus, obtaining a better understanding of the factors that lead to mentor attraction may have important implications for both organizations deciding to set up a formal program and also for those who are relying on mentoring relationships to occur informally. This study attempts to yield additional insight with regards to mentor attraction and subsequently provide some considerations for mentoring relationships.

## **Mentoring**

The term mentoring is quite broad in use; it is sometimes used to refer to tutoring relationships, friendships, or even coaching relationships. Mentoring can occur in different settings, including face-to-face, through the internet, or over the phone (Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003). For the purposes of the current study, mentoring is conceptualized as any form of relationship in which one individual provides needed support or knowledge to another. Mentoring relationships have been found to be associated with numerous positive outcomes for protégés, such as higher career and job satisfaction, or higher rates of promotion (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004; Koberg, Boss, Chappell, & Ringer, 1994). Furthermore, they are advocated for easing the transition of minorities into underrepresented areas of employment (Alvarez, Blume, Cervantes, & Thomas, 2009; Evans & Cockley, 2008).

Mentoring relationships can either occur as part of a formal mentoring program, in which mentors and protégés are paired with one another by the overseeing organization, or informally, where mentors and protégés befriend one another and oversee their relationship themselves (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Redmond, 1990; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In some formal programs, protégés may be allowed to select their own mentors from a list of biographies/basic personal information. However, in most cases, mentors and protégés are paired at the discretion of the overseers. Little is known regarding the most effective mentoring dyad composition for which these overseers should strive. However, many argue that demographic and gender similarity may be important for initial relationship success (e.g., Patton, 2009). Others have found that attitude similarity is important for later relationship success (de Janasz, Ensher, & Heun, 2008). For informal relationships, protégés likely seek out mentors whom they feel have skills and knowledge that may help them. However, little is known regarding the characteristics that these individuals likely seek from an informal mentor. The goal of this study is to provide additional information on this matter – specifically, this study attempts to broaden our understanding of the factors that lead to preferences with regard to mentor gender and race.

## **Demographic Similarity**

Numerous studies have previously found that perceived similarity of values and attitudes is related to mentoring relationship effectiveness (e.g., de Janasz, et al., 2008). However, the initial attraction for protégés is likely based on surface-level characteristics, as these attitudes and values do not likely become apparent until mentors and protégés have time with one another. In support of this notion, a great deal of literature has proposed that the similarity of mentors and protégés is one of the most important components for initial attraction. For example, females will likely be attracted to other females as role models, and males will likely seek out other males as role models. It has previously been found that mentor and protégé attitudinal and sex similarity are associated with the provision of increased mentoring functions (Avery, Tonindandel, & Phillips, 2008). Thus, it is likely that individuals may feel more comfortable discussing certain topics with, and request certain types of information from, same gender individuals. Hence, it was hypothesized that: *H1a. Individuals will rate same-gender mentors higher than different gender mentors.*

It has also been suggested that race similarity is another critical component in some cases. Patton (2009) provided numerous arguments supporting the notion that African American females need mentors with shared cultural experience in order to maximize their potential success. For example, African American women are likely to face such issues as lower self-efficacy, feelings of isolation, and higher stress levels. In Patton's study, African American women reported issues such as desiring more nurturing, needing support to feel confident in speaking up and addressing their concerns when needed, and having straightforward, candid, conversations about important issues that they were facing. All of these issues are likely most easily dealt with by simply having a similar gender/race mentor. Moreover, African Americans are more likely to face marginalization, discrimination, and minimization of their inputs in decisions, etc. (e.g., Diggs, Garrison-Wade, Estrada, & Galindo, 2009). However, it has been further argued that these relationships are hard to come by, as there are oftentimes too few African American mentors available to provide this support (Jeste, Twamley, Cardenas, Lebowitz, & Reynolds, 2009; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Patton & Harper, 2003).

In support of the importance of African American women having same-race mentors, another study found that African Americans were more likely to report having a same-race mentor in informal relationships relative to other ethnic groups (Coleman, Power, Williams, Carpentieri, & Schulkin, 2005). This is likely attributable to African Americans seeking out individuals whom they perceived would be able to provide them with desired mentoring functions, but it may also be partially attributable to non-minority mentors not seeking out minority protégés to mentor. Other research has found that Caucasian mentors were more likely to accept mentoring requests from minority protégés when they were perceived to be pro-active by the potential mentors (Thomas, Hu, Gewin, Bingham, & Yanchus, 2005). However, minorities may be less likely to feel comfortable asserting themselves in this way with Caucasian mentors, further perpetuating the problem. Thus, it was proposed that: *H1b. Individuals will rate same-race mentors higher than different race mentors.*

### **Anticipation of Mentoring Functions**

There are two different types of mentoring functions generally recognized as being provided during the course of the mentoring relationship. Specifically, mentoring functions are generally categorized as having either psychosocial or career development qualities (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Psychosocial functions refer to addressing social and/or psychologically related issues, such as friendship, counseling, and acceptance. Whereas career development functions, on the other hand, refer to addressing work and career related issues, such as coaching and providing challenging assignments. A recent meta-analysis found that male mentors reported providing more career development functions than female mentors did, and conversely, female mentors reported providing more psychosocial functions relative to male mentors (O'Brien, Biga, Kessler, & Allen, 2010). It may be the case that individuals who are more concerned about receiving psychosocial related-functions will likely prefer females, and individuals concerned about receiving academic or career related information will likely prefer males. Based on this reasoning, we proposed that: *H2a. Individuals who rate psychosocial related functions higher will be more likely to prefer female mentors. H2b. Individuals who rate academic or career support functions higher will be more likely to prefer male mentors.*

There are many psychosocial related functions that may, in some cases, be best imparted by similar race mentors. As previously argued, certain components, such as role-modeling functions or speaking candidly, may be much easier for a same race mentor to convey. For example, when facing issues related to feelings of marginalization, as can be likely for any ethnic minority group, individuals need to learn strategies to properly assert themselves. They must also learn proper channels to take when their assertions or pleas are ignored. Given the extra-burdens that minorities are likely to encounter, it also stands to reason that they will likely benefit greatly from having someone serve as a friend, someone who can provide them with some extra encouragement and support. Furthermore, minorities in many cases may be less likely to have a well-developed knowledge framework for the environments that they enter. For example, they likely need to learn when others' behaviors are normal or appropriate (e.g., receiving negative feedback from supervisors) and how to interpret and deal with such behaviors.

Additionally, it has been found that African American students were more likely to have positive attitudes regarding things like asking for academic or career related information from Caucasians. However, they were much less likely to seek out help for personal issues from Caucasians (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). One of the barriers posited for refusing to seek out help is that of possible racism (e.g., Obasi & Leong, 2009). Thus, having a same race mentor may be attractive to some individuals in order to overcome this limitation. Same race mentors are more likely to have similar backgrounds, similar approaches toward interacting with one another, and have likely had to overcome similar obstacles. In turn, a same race mentor may be perceived as being able to provide more psychosocial support functions relative to different race mentors. When these psychosocial functions are considered important to individuals, they will likely demonstrate a preference for same race mentors. Hence, it was hypothesized that: *H3: Participant race will interact with the need for psychosocial support functions to predict overall African American and Caucasian mentor ratings. Specifically, it is proposed that individuals will rate*

*same-race mentors higher than different-race mentors when they desire psychosocial support functions, and race will be less important when they rate these functions lower.*

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 184 individuals from a large Southwestern university. Seventy-two of the participants were African American (39%) and 112 were Caucasian (61%). Moreover, there were 125 females (68%) and 59 males (32%). Participants volunteered to participate in this study in order to obtain experimental research credits for classes.

### **Procedures**

Mentor profiles were developed from examining numerous different types of profiles available on the Internet. The profiles were then reviewed by various students of different demographics, who evaluated the extent to which the profiles appeared realistic and the extent to which they felt that the intended demographic information in the profiles was salient. Modifications were made as needed, and re-reviewed until there were no further contentions. Figure 1 illustrates some sample profiles.

**FIGURE 1**  
**SAMPLES OF MENTOR PROFILES**

#### *African American Female*

Kecia, age 20. Kecia is a student athlete on the university volley ball team. She is very active in student government as well as her sorority's community outreach program. Kecia regularly attends church services and is popular on campus. Kecia comes from a single parent household and is the eldest of four children. In her spare time, Kecia likes to exercise and chat on the phone.

#### *Caucasian Male*

Justin, age 20. Justin is an officer in the university R.O. T. C. program. A senior in the honors college of business, Justin averages 18 credit hours per semester. Justin plans on attending graduate school after his required four year military service. Justin maintains a part-time job in the mail room of a large technology company while going to school. Justin lives at home with his parents and brother and sister. Justin lists his hobbies as "reading anything business related" and running.

Two different versions of the study were created to minimize fatigue effects that would have otherwise occurred if all profiles were administered. Moreover, this allowed for us to create more variation in the information provided in the profiles. Initially, two biographies were developed, and then one biography was made a female in one version, whereas that same biography was made a male in the other version. In turn, the effects of the caliber of the profiles were minimized for gender, and the realism of the profiles accentuated.

The survey was posted electronically and therefore was accessible to the participants at any time, from any location. To facilitate completing the survey, each profile and its respective questions had its own individual page. Thus, individuals could easily access and review the biography while completing the questions.

Several different analyses were conducted to examine the efficacy of the manipulations in addition to the general perceptions of individuals' ratings. We were concerned about the realism of the profiles, and the extent to which individuals would be able to make inferences about the people whom they were rating. On average, participants positively endorsed the question "I feel that the biographies presented likely gave valuable insight into the mentors' personalities" ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) on a scale from 1 -

*Strongly Agree* to 6 - *Strongly Disagree*. Thus, this offers some support that participants felt they had enough information to make some inferences about the people described in the biographies.

## Measures

### *Mentor Profile Ratings*

Individuals rated the profiles with nine different questions for each profile. Sample questions included “To what extent could this mentor serve as a role model for you?” and “To what extent does this mentor likely have valuable information for you?”, rated on a 6-point rating scale (1 not *at all* to 6 a *great extent*). Coefficient alphas indicated that the questions were answered relatively consistently within profiles (African American males,  $\alpha = .94$ ; African American females,  $\alpha = .96$ ; Caucasian males,  $\alpha = .96$ ; Caucasian females,  $\alpha = .93$ ). These items were then averaged for each demographic category.

### *Mentoring Functions*

Six items were used to assess the importance of each mentoring function; there were three items measuring the importance of receiving psychosocial support and three items for assessing academic/career support. Items were rated on a 7-point rating scale (1 - *Not at all Important* to 7 - *Extremely Important*). An example item assessing psychosocial support functions read “I would prefer a mentor who can serve as a friend” and an example assessing career support read, “I would prefer a mentor who is knowledgeable in my field.”

### *Demographic Information*

Finally, race and gender information was collected at the end of the survey, in order to prevent biasing responses on the mentor profile ratings.

## RESULTS

One-tailed tests were used to examine the relationships explicitly hypothesized, and two-tailed tests were used for exploratory analyses. For the first hypothesis, it was proposed that individuals would prefer demographically similar mentors. For the first part of hypothesis 1, gender similarity was examined. Before conducting the analyses, differences in profile ratings were examined. Female profiles ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .78$ ), in general, were rated slightly higher than male profiles ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) with a significant difference ( $t(329) = 3.180$ ,  $p = <.01$ , two-tailed). This is likely attributable to there being a larger percentage of female participants. As hypothesized, using a dependent samples *t*-test, females did indeed rate female profiles ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) higher ( $t(213) = 3.633$ ,  $p <.001$ , one-tailed) on average than they did male profiles ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = .74$ ). However, males did not rate male mentors higher, as anticipated, ( $t(114) = .417$ ,  $p = .34$ , two-tailed). In fact, there was even a very slight favoritism toward female mentors.

For the second part of the first hypothesis, it was proposed that similarity would be important with regards to race. First, overall ratings across all mentor profiles were aggregated and examined for differences between African Americans and Caucasians. Although not statistically different, there was a tendency for African American participants ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = .63$ ,  $N = 72$ ) to have higher ratings of profiles ( $t(182) = 1.519$ ,  $p = .131$ , two-tailed) relative to Caucasians ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = .75$ ,  $N = 112$ ). Using a dependent samples *t*-test, overall, there was a significant effect for mentor race. Specifically, Caucasian mentors ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = .82$ ,  $N = 330$ ) received higher ratings than did African American mentors ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = .78$ ,  $N = 330$ ), ( $t(329) = -4.163$ ,  $p <.001$ , one-tailed). To test the hypothesis, dependent samples *t*-tests were then run for African American and Caucasian participants separately. Contrary to our hypothesis, African Americans did not differentiate statistically between their ratings of Caucasian ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = .70$ ,  $N = 72$ ) and African American mentors ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .77$ ,  $N = 72$ ), ( $t(71) = -.609$ ,  $p = .272$ , one-tailed). Caucasian participants did however rate Caucasian mentors ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $N = 112$ ) higher than African American mentors ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = .85$ ,  $N = 112$ ), ( $t(111) = -1.751$ ,  $p = .04$ , one-tailed). Thus, this hypothesis was partially supported.

For the first part of the second hypothesis, it was proposed that individuals who reported a higher need for psychosocial-related functions would be more likely to prefer a female. To test this hypothesis, difference scores (male averaged ratings minus female averaged ratings) were utilized. Although a small effect, this relationship was supported ( $r = -.10$ ,  $N=329$ ,  $p = .03$ , one-tailed). Similarly, for hypothesis 3b it was proposed that individuals who reported a higher need for academic/career related functions would be more likely to prefer a male mentor. However, this portion of the hypothesis was not supported ( $r = -.05$ ,  $N=329$ ,  $p = .17$ , one-tailed). Moreover, it appears that there was a slight tendency toward individuals preferring females for these functions also. This is partially attributable to females having higher reports than males in general.

As a supplementary analysis, two regression equations were then completed. The first predicted ratings of female mentors, controlling for ratings of male mentors (to correct for the effects of mono-method bias). The interaction of focal participant gender and expectations of psychosocial support were included. The second model included the same variables, however predicted ratings of male mentors controlling the ratings of female mentors. Both of the control variables were significant. However, the only other predictive variable was expectations of psychosocial support in the model predicting female ratings (See Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**PARTICIPANT RATINGS OF FEMALE AND MALE PROFILES**

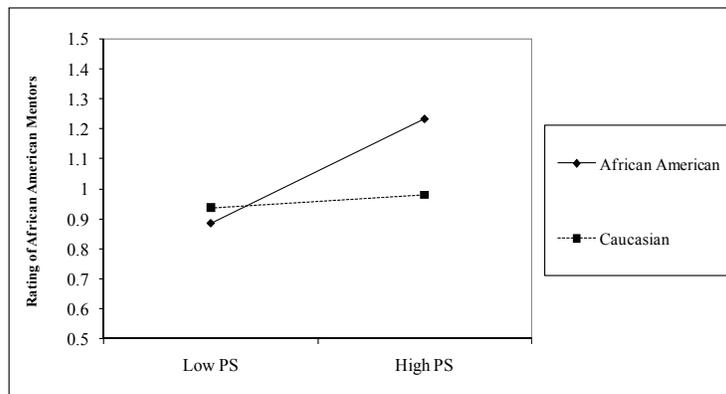
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	One-tailed <i>p</i> -value
<b>Predicting Female Ratings</b>				
Gender ( <i>Female = 0, Male = 1</i> )	-0.09	0.45	-0.05	0.43
Psychosocial Support	0.15	0.05	0.20	<0.01
Interaction of Gender and Psychosocial Support	0.02	0.09	0.05	0.43
Male Ratings	0.68	0.06	0.64	<0.01
Overall $F = 43.34$ , $p < .001$ , Adjusted $R^2 = .493$				
<b>Predicting Male Ratings</b>				
Gender ( <i>Female = 0, Male = 1</i> )	-0.23	0.43	-0.14	0.30
Psychosocial Support	-0.05	0.05	-0.07	0.18
Interaction of Gender and Psychosocial Support	0.06	0.08	0.19	0.24
Female Ratings	0.63	0.05	0.68	<0.01
Overall $F = 37.66$ , $p < .001$ , Adjusted $R^2 = .446$				

For our third hypothesis, it was proposed that a desire for psychosocial support functions would interact with participant race in predicting overall African American and Caucasian mentor ratings. First, the relationship with expectation of psychosocial support with regards to ratings of mentors overall was examined. Individuals who desired psychosocial functions had higher overall ratings ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed). To test the first part of the hypothesis, African American mentor ratings were examined, including Caucasian mentor ratings as a control. The interaction of psychosocial support and race neared statistical significance at an alpha of .05 ( $\beta = -.464$ ,  $p = .0504$ , one-tailed; see Table 2). The plot of this interaction indicates that African Americans preferred African American mentors when they desired psychosocial support (See Figure 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**PARTICIPANT RATINGS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTOR PROFILES**

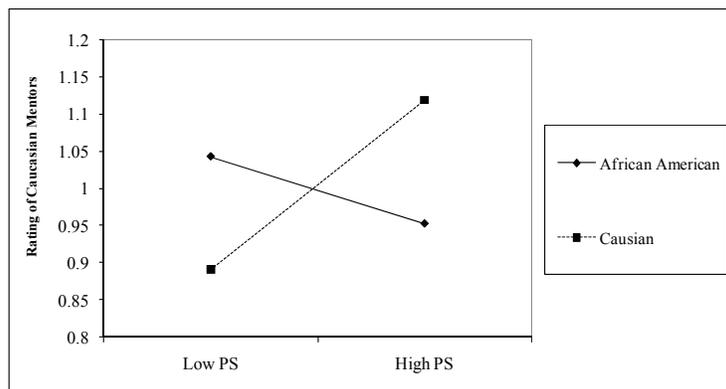
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	One-tailed <i>p</i> -value
Race ( <i>African American = 0, Caucasian = 1</i> )	0.63	0.46	0.38	0.08
Psychosocial Support	0.18	0.07	0.24	<0.01
Interaction of Race and Psychosocial Support	-0.15	0.09	-0.46	0.05
Caucasian Ratings	0.64	0.05	0.65	<0.01
Overall $F = 41.37, p < .001, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .482$				

**FIGURE 2**  
**PARTICIPANT RATINGS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MENTOR PROFILES**



Then, similarly Caucasian mentor ratings were examined including African American mentor ratings as a control. The interaction of psychosocial support and race again neared significance ( $\beta = .469, p = .0506$ , one-tailed). As indicated in Figure 3, Caucasians preferred Caucasian mentors when they desired psychosocial support functions. Moreover, African American ratings of Caucasian profiles dropped substantially when they desired psychosocial support functions relative to when these functions were less desired. See Table 3 for the other values from these models.

**FIGURE 3**  
**PARTICIPANT RATINGS OF CAUCASIAN MENTOR PROFILES**



**TABLE 3**  
**PARTICIPANT RATINGS OF CAUCASIAN MENTOR PROFILES**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	One-tailed <i>p</i> -value
Race ( <i>African American = 0, Caucasian = 1</i> )	-0.76	0.48	-0.44	0.06
Psychosocial Support	-0.06	0.08	-0.08	0.21
Interaction of Race and Psychosocial Support	0.15	0.09	0.47	0.05
African American Ratings	0.69	0.06	0.67	<0.01
Overall $F = 39.14, p < .001, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .468$				

To further examine this relation, *d*-score values were computed (ratings of African American mentors minus Caucasian mentors divided by the within-participant standard deviations of the items assessing these mentors). Examining these *d*-values, it was found that psychosocial support was related to the *d*-score value ( $r = .26, N = 72, p = .02$ , one-tailed), indicating that African Americans who believed that psychosocial functions were important were more likely to rate African American mentors higher than Caucasian mentors. However, although heading in the anticipated direction, the difference for Caucasians did not reach statistical significance ( $r = -.13, N = 110, p = .09$ , one-tailed). Thus, it appears that if psychosocial functions are important to potential protégés, then race similarity should be considered.

## DISCUSSION

There is, to date, little research examining the extent to which minority individuals may differ in their mentor preferences, and also the extent to which mentor demographics may affect initial attraction for protégés. This research attempted to provide some additional insight in these regards and, in turn, some guidance for further research and practice.

For gender similarity, it was found that females preferred other females, but males did not prefer male mentors, as anticipated. It is likely that various other contextual and individual disposition characteristics come into play for males' preferences. For example, it is plausible that males may have been considering date-ability for some of the female profiles. Even so, it does appear that mentor gender may be an important consideration for females. As discussed by Chao (2009), the relevance of the matching criteria to the organizational context should be considered. One of the first studies to examining the interaction of contextual effects and mentor gender and protégé relationship outcomes (Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, & Wiethoff, 2010) found that females with male mentors, relative to females with female mentors, obtained better career benefits in male-oriented organizations.

With regards to race similarity, Caucasians did tend to rate Caucasian mentors higher than African Americans. However, this relationship was not supported for African American participants. Furthermore, although not statistically significant, African Americans had slightly higher ratings of the profiles in general. Consistent with this finding, is possible that African Americans may have a higher need for mentoring functions due to facing additional obstacles coupled with less availability of potential mentors (Jeste, et al., 2009; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Patton & Harper, 2003). The lack of potential mentors that are actually available may support their beliefs that other African American mentors are not attainable – and subsequently any options are appealing. Moreover, it is plausible that some African Americans believe that some Caucasians can offer important information that another African American might not be able to provide.

While there may be potential benefits of pairing protégés with same-gender/same-race mentors, it is important to realize that there may also be detrimental effects incurred, if there is only one same-gender/same-race mentor provided for minority protégés. Minority mentors may be of higher status than their protégés, but, depending on minority composition at higher levels, they may also be less knowledgeable relative to their non-minority counterparts, as they themselves may be trudging new

ground. Thus, in these instances, it may be more beneficial that minority protégés receive career-development mentoring functions from a majority-member mentor.

However, the results of the current study suggest that individuals may be attracted to same demographic mentors. These same-demographic mentors may not be as well-equipped in the career development functions arena, although they may be superior with regards to psychosocial support functions for minority members. Thus, the needs of the protégés should be evaluated to make the best use of mentoring resources. The current study found that protégés who desired psychosocial functions preferred a female, and also a similar race mentor, whereas gender and race were less important if these functions were not personally important. Thus, in some instances, it may be imperative to pair protégés with multiple mentors – one from whom the protégé can receive psychosocial related functions, and another from whom the protégé can receive career related information. Consistent with this notion, numerous studies have demonstrated positive findings for individuals having multiple mentors (e.g., Baugh & Scandura, 1999; Kay & Wallace, 2010). However, as found by Baugh and Scandura, having more than two mentors may limit protégé returns and may be detrimental with regards to role conflict.

Finally, organizations that do not have formal mentoring programs should consider that minority race members may be less likely to have same-race mentors whom they can seek out (Jeste et al., 2009) and may be less likely to approach non-minority mentors. Assuming there are some higher-level minority mentors, numerous lower-level protégés may become a burden on these mentors. In support of this notion, some studies have found that minority mentors in these circumstances do tend to have higher mentoring responsibilities (for example, see Harrington & Hunt, 2010). Moreover, a lack of proper mentoring may preclude these individuals from some of the career successes that might be attainable otherwise. Thus, extra efforts to help pair these individuals with mentors (and to wisely utilize and support mentors) may be beneficial.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are numerous limitations with the current methodological approach, however, attempts were made to overcome these issues whenever possible (such as by using difference scores and including other ratings into regression models). Future research is needed to examine the extent to which these ratings hold true for individuals entering actual mentoring relationships, where there is more of a commitment and something real to be gained by the protégés. Moreover, the generalizability of these findings should be examined in different types of organizations. Finally, future research needs to examine the extent to which initial mentor attraction might affect the relationship in the latter stages, and also the outcomes of these relationships.

### **Conclusion**

The current research provides some guidance with regards to considerations for organizations that currently have mentoring programs, or that are considering implementing such a program. The results of the current study, in conjunction with prior studies, suggest that formal mentor programs may be necessary to remediate some of the disparities that may likely occur due to initial mentor attraction, based on protégé demographic characteristics and personal needs. Moreover, the current research indicates that considering protégé needs may be important in determining with whom the protégé should be matched.

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