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Under the microscope: Gender and mentor–protégé relationships

Donnalyn Pompper*, Jonathan Adams

Department of Communication, Florida State University, 1506 Wekiva Nene, Tallahassee, FL 32301, United States

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Abstract

Forty (40) depth interviews were conducted among Florida-based public relations practitioners to examine mentor–protégé relationship dynamics according to gender. Two factors, *compatibility* and *structural features*, are offered to explain successful mentoring in public relations and to suggest a strategy for maximizing its benefits. Moreover, mentoring facilitates career enhancement in five important ways (*supplement to college training, validation and empowerment, department, networking, reciprocity*) – and gender composition of vertical dyads seems to matter a great deal.

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1. Literature review

O'Neill and Blake-Beard (2002) concluded that a fine-grained perspective of mentor–protégé relationships remains elusive. In public relations, most would agree that mentoring is a positive activity with profession-enhancing outcomes – yet very few researchers have put mentor–protégé dynamics in the U.S. under the microscope.

1.1. Mentoring and predicting success

Mentoring is a “developmental, caring, sharing, helping relationship where one person invests time, know-how and effort in increasing and improving another person’s growth knowledge and skills” (Shea, 1995, p. 3). In mentor–protégé studies, the “dyad” is the fundamental unit of analysis – an interactive small group consisting of at least two people in a formal role or position (Tsui & Gutek, 1999). The supervisor–subordinate relationship is the classic vertical dyad. Several factors predict success of a mentor–protégé relationship: personality, values, physical and intellectual traits, as well as gender, race, class, and nationality (Ashford & Mael, 1989). Also, similarity best predicts spontaneous interpersonal attraction (Marsden, 1988).

1.2. Benefits of mentoring

Mentoring benefits organizations, mentors, and protégés. Outcomes are a serendipitous by-product for organizations in terms of leadership, talent, motivation, and retention (Kalbfleisch, 2000). For mentors, the relationship satisfies social expectations; an altruistic desire to help those less experienced that culminates in protégé loyalty (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993). Protégés may gain the most since they can tap into mentors’ strong network ties, build competence and self-

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 850 561 1515.

E-mail address: donnalyn.pompper@comm.fsu.edu (D. Pompper).

32 image that may lead to effectiveness, increased satisfaction, and career enhancement, as well as salary bumps and
33 promotions (Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000).

34 1.3. Informal versus formal mentoring

35 A subset of the mentoring literature contrasts informal and formal mentoring programs, as defined by the matching
36 process and its duration. Formal dyads typically are assigned by a third party and last 6–12 months and informal ones
37 evolve spontaneously and last 3–6 years (Murray, 1991). Considered “superficial alliances at best,” formal mentoring
38 may force coupling, fuel negativity, and violate the true spirit of mentoring (Armstrong, Allinson, & Hayes, 2002, p.
39 1113).

40 1.4. Gender difference

41 Demography, especially gender, is the most extensively researched factor impacting vertical dyad success (see
42 Ragins, 1999, for a review). Several studies have found no gender differences in the *quantity* of mentoring received
43 (e.g., Scandura & Williams, 2001), yet relationship *quality* tends to suffer when gender difference is inconsistent with
44 social norms. Supposedly, females are considered more caring and nurturing (Bem, 1974) so female mentors provide
45 more *psycho-social mentoring* (emotional support) to protégés and male mentors report providing more *career-related*
46 *mentoring* (Allen & Eby, 2004).

47 Findings of same-gender vertical dyad outcomes are conflicting and inconsistent. Some say homogeneity is prefer-
48 able, while others suggest that cross-gender mentoring relationships are harder to develop, perhaps due to sexual
49 innuendo and restrictions in perceived similarity (see Hurley & Fagenson-Eland, 1996, for a review). More commonly,
50 male mentors pair with female protégés (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). The female mentor–male protégé dyad seems to
51 yield the least comfort for both parties (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2002), perhaps because this cross-gender dyad reverses
52 traditional gender roles.

53 1.5. Mentoring in public relations

54 Mentoring is synonymous with public relations career enhancement. The International Association of Business
55 Communicators (IABC) and Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) encourage chapter mentoring programs
56 (Cline, Turk, Walters, Johnson, & Smith, 1986; Wright, Grunig, Springston, & Toth, 1991). Aldoor (1988) leadership
57 in public relations study stressed importance of mentoring.

58 Gender difference in mentoring has attracted little attention among public relations researchers, however. One
59 study found that same-gender “subordinates” and “superiors” enjoyed more fruitful mentoring relationships, that male
60 supervisors were more influential and helpful, but that female “subordinates” evaluated male supervisors less favorably
61 (Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, & Real, 1995). More recently, females credited mentoring for their professional development
62 significantly more often than males (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001).

63 Perhaps the most widely recognized forms of early mentoring in public relations are student internships. Most
64 college curricula require or urge students to gain practical work experience where they are assigned to a supervisor
65 who serves as a mentor (The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999).

66 2. Research questions

67 Central themes that underscore importance of the current study and logically lead to its research questions are:
68 (a) mentoring is a well-supported career enhancement strategy; (b) both supervisors and subordinates favor gender
69 homogeneity in vertical dyads; (c) females tend to give and receive psycho-social mentoring more often than males;
70 and (d) males tend to give and receive career mentoring more often than females. Three research questions were posed
71 to offer insight into contemporary mentor–protégé relationship dynamics in a public relations setting:

72 *RQ1: What factors explain successful mentoring in public relations?*

73 *RQ2: To what degree might mentoring facilitate career enhancement among public relations practitioners?*

RQ3: Does gender matter in public relations mentoring? How?

3. Method

One-on-one interviews were conducted so that respondents could reflect on their own experiences as protégé and/or mentor. This method allowed for rich, exploratory data gathering. Findings cannot be generalized, but the level of detail emerging from personal anecdotes offers means to maximize benefits of mentoring.

Interviews were conducted by four female interviewers; one of the authors and three undergraduate students (who received directed independent study course credit) trained by the authors. A convenience sample of Florida Public Relations Association (FPRA) members (Tallahassee, Orlando, Jacksonville) was drawn using FPRA's 2004 membership directory. Potential respondents were contacted by telephone and/or email and screened to ensure that they currently worked in public relations and had either been a protégé or a mentor in public relations.

In-person depth interviews were conducted during September 2004–January 2005 at practitioners' offices and audiotaped (with permission); each lasting 1–1.5 h. Two protocols were used and pre-tested among three Tallahassee practitioners with few substantive changes: (a) pre-interview questionnaire with 14 probes (demographics, organization structure, job title, number and demographics of mentors and protégés) and (b) interview topic guide with 6 probes (relationships with mentors, relationships with protégés, duration of relationship and its dynamics). Researchers examined patterns among verbatim transcriptions of interviews (independently and as a group) by categorizing data according to patterns, themes, and anomalies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) noted on index cards and discussed during several 3-h data analysis sessions.

4. Findings

Interview respondents ($n=40$) were Florida-based practitioners (24 females, 16 males) working in not-for-profit settings (25), consulting agencies (12), and corporate environments (3). Thirty-four respondents were Caucasian, 5 Hispanic (3 females, 2 males), 1 (female) African American. Altogether, female respondents reported that 3 of their 40 female mentors were ethnic minorities and 2 of their 27 male mentors were ethnic minorities. Male respondents reported that 1 of their 9 female mentors was an ethnic minority and 2 of their 29 male mentors were ethnic minorities. Regarding ethnicity of protégés, female respondents reported that 11 of their 89 female protégés were ethnic minorities and 5 of their 16 male protégés were ethnic minorities. Male respondents reported that 13 of their 60 female protégés were ethnic minorities and 8 of their 34 male protégés were ethnic minorities.

In findings organized according to each research question, interview respondents are identified by a letter (F for female, M for male) plus a number (1–24 for females, 1–16 for males). Respondents' positions ranked from senior-level manager to entry-level. All had earned a bachelor's degree, with nine respondents (all female) having earned the APR, and eight holding graduate degrees. Respondents had an average of 4.7 (females) and 12.3 (males) years of public relations experience. All but five respondents had experienced both sides of at least one mentor–protégé relationship.

4.1. RQ1: What factors explain successful mentoring in public relations?

Two factors emerged among respondents' characterization of successful mentoring in public relations.

4.1.1. Compatibility

Compatibility is the most important factor to emerge among respondents' descriptions of how to compose a more perfect mentor–protégé relationship. Qualities desirable among both mentors and protégés are respect, professionalism, honesty, and ability to express appreciation/gratitude.

Mentors seek protégés with whom they feel comfortable (chemistry/mutual liking, non-competitive, non-aggressive); protégés who are driven (willing to learn and grow, possess initiative, motivated, type A personality), capable (able to follow office protocol, good managing time, diligent, attend to detail, strong work ethic, flexible, team player), skillful (creative, technological savvy), and mature (positive attitude, accountable, ability to take direction and accept feedback).

Protégés seek mentors who are knowledgeable (willing to share information and ideas), good role models (someone to look up to, good values, integrity, trustworthy) and managers (organized, consistent) who are insightful (appreciate individuality, recognize potential, believe in me, take a personal interest in me) and patient (supportive, helpful, inspire confidence, good listening skills, understand mistakes).

4.1.2. Structural features

Respondents added that mentoring works best when it is embedded in *structural features* of an organization in terms of full support and core values/spirit/philosophy. F-1 explained her organization's commitment to mentoring: "Everyone is expected to mentor the next lower one down." Specific aspects of mentoring that are formalized across the workplace may include mentor training complete with handbooks, schedules, measurable outcomes, luncheons, and periodic reviews.

4.2. RQ2: To what degree might mentoring facilitate career enhancement among public relations practitioners?

Nearly all respondents spoke fondly of mentor–protégé experiences and attributed their status and job satisfaction to mentoring received (and given) along the way. Respondents also noted the value of long-term relationships with mentors; several citing relationships lasting 10 years or more that have evolved into friendships. Five discrete patterns (listed in no particular order) emerged among practitioners' voices as they answered probes designed to respond to this research question.

4.2.1. Supplement to college training

Respondents reported that mentoring on the job is especially important in public relations because college courses may fail to adequately prepare new practitioners. F-10 explained: "I firmly believe that without that opportunity I would not be in this field today. Not to knock academics, but . . . there's only so much you can learn in the classroom and from a textbook." More critically, M-11 posited: "A lot of times a public relations program at a university isn't maybe as specific in things as it needs to be."

4.2.2. Validation and empowerment

Respondents noted that mentoring is validating and empowering. M-16 described the process: "[W]hen you're trying to teach someone something, you do it first and the other person watches. Then, the second time you both do it together. The third time you do it by yourself." M-15 receives an occasional "pat on the back" from his male mentor, M-14 enjoys "professional appreciation" from his, and F-19 said that her mentor accelerated her learning and inspired confidence. F-22 added that mentors can be a career-long resource: "Just the fact that you have somebody you can pick the phone up and say, 'You know, I'm in this dilemma and I'm not sure what to do'."

4.2.3. Deportment

Respondents spoke generously of mentors who have taught them how to *fit in* at work – through negotiating organizational hierarchies and behaving and dressing a certain way. M-4 said that a female mentor taught him "more about politics and getting along with people than about the technical aspects of a PR job." Likewise, M-2 said: "The only reason I'm as successful as I am in life is because I've had good mentors who taught me how to behave socially or politically." Personal appearance issues surfaced often. A female mentor–supervisor advised F-24 on how to dress: "[N]o one has taught it to me more than her. She's just so poised and professional."

4.2.4. Networking

Joining a mentor's network and developing one's own is central to advancement.

F-23 linked networking to success: "[I]f we are isolated in an office . . . we don't have any contact with other professionals or with the outside world then I don't think we can be effective." F-18 said that formal mentoring promotes "instant networking:" "As soon as we got back from lunch I felt like I had four friends I could go chat with whenever I needed to."

4.2.5. Reciprocity

Respondents who have been mentors cited numerous rewards and those who have been protégés shared anecdotes of reciprocity. M-14 said that he learns from a protégé's fresh, creative ideas, while M-12 enjoys being challenged by a protégé who can teach him something. F-23 said she experiences much satisfaction from watching her protégés advance. F-12 said that mentoring "keeps you grounded; focused on why you're in the profession." M-4 described mentors' altruism: "There is nothing great about having information and understanding of concepts if you are just going to keep it all for yourself." F-13 said that she now shares media lists with her mentor.

163 4.3. RQ3: Does gender matter in public relations mentoring? How?

164 Distinct gender differences emerged among respondents' anecdotes and thick descriptions of mentor–protégé rela-
165 tionships.

166 4.3.1. Females

167 Three patterns emerged among female respondents' voices regarding mentoring: (1) shortage of males, (2) psycho-
168 social support, and (3) conflicts.

169 First, the feminization of public relations may impact quantity and quality of mentoring relationships. Several
170 female respondents said that they actively seek male mentors because they perceive males as being better able to help
171 them climb management ranks. Explained F-21: "Those [men] are the ones that have made the most success and,
172 unfortunately, tend to still be primarily the business owners or run the companies [so] that's who I'm going to for the
173 advice – the owner, not somebody below them." Overall, F-24 underscored sentiments of many female respondents:
174 "There just aren't a lot of males out there willing to mentor. It's not by choice [having a female mentor]. It's just what's
175 available out there."

176 Second, several female respondents pointed out that it's the emotional (psycho-social) connections that make
177 mentoring worthwhile. F-7 described how a male mentor helped her launch a firm: "People would call him and he
178 would rant and rave about me . . . he opened every door he could have possibly ever opened for me." F-23 prefers
179 female protégés: "I know where I came from and I see someone in similar circumstances and [I want to] help lead them
180 to success." F-2 welcomes female junior colleagues into her office so that they can cry about broken relationships in
181 their personal lives. F-9 recently switched from a career in television news to public relations where she works with
182 her female "best friend." Many females described reluctance to let go of a mentor's emotional support, and F-17 said
183 that her protégés routinely contact her for "gut checks."

184 Conversely, some female respondents' stories suggested that mentors can contradict traditional social norms. F-23
185 told of how a female mentor "literally threw me in and told me to swim" and later promoted her to a position with
186 greater responsibility: "[I]t made a huge difference in my career." F-13 similarly described one of her male mentors:
187 "He would tell me how it was, and basically he would say, 'I'm gonna throw you off the cliff and we'll see; you can
188 ask for forgiveness'."

189 Third, several female respondents reported conflicts and openly criticized male mentors and protégés. F-13 told
190 how a male mentor inadvertently held her back: "[He] was very fatherly in his approach . . . protecting me from what
191 the PR experience is, which sometimes can be extremely difficult, high pressure . . . but I didn't get to put it as much
192 into practice until the next two mentors." F-5 avoids "lip service men." F-6 has worked with male protégés, but added
193 that they probably "would not own up to that."

194 Alternatively, some female respondents eschewed the same-gender vertical dyad outright. F-13 bluntly labeled
195 female mentor–protégé relationships "the reason women aren't moving up in this business." Furthermore, F-13 said
196 she chose male mentors because she saw women elsewhere in her organization failing to support one another and being
197 "tougher on the female employees to the extent that it was detrimental." F-6 described a female mentor who wanted
198 to create a clone: "Forcing me to do something the way you do it just because it works for you isn't always going to
199 work for me."

200 4.3.2. Males

201 Three specific patterns regarding gender in public relations mentoring also emerged among transcripts of interviews
202 with male respondents: (1) career-related support, (2) style, and (3) working with females.

203 First, male respondents described specific occasions wherein mentors helped them throughout their career. M-16
204 told how a male mentor advanced him – first as an intern and then twice more through moves with him to other
205 companies – each time garnering a higher salary and more prestigious job title. M-4 also reported that his male mentor
206 took him along when switching jobs. M-8 identified advantages of a female mentor's FPRA and client connections.
207 M-1 characterized his best mentor as someone who recognized that he could teach him no more: "He helped me to
208 make the next move professionally . . . he called me into the office and said, 'Son, you need to go somewhere else.
209 Here's an opportunity that has just come across my desk and you should explore this'."

210 Second, most male respondents reported that they seek only male mentors. M-16 explained: "Someone who I identify
211 as a role model and whose thought patterns and general behavior probably will influence mine." M-15 described his

212 mentor–supervisor’s aptitude in identifying his strengths and weaknesses: “[H]e’s able to turn around and say . . . ‘I
213 want you to start working on this to help make you stronger in this area.’” M-14 said that his male mentor’s “demanding”
214 personality enabled him to develop long-range planning skills. Similarly, M-2 said that as an “ex-Navy NCO,” it “does
215 not matter whether you’re a girl or a guy – I’ve got the same irascible personality that I give out to everybody that I
216 deal with and that’s just part of the mentoring process.” M-5 explained his male mentor’s “tough love” role: “I totally
217 came in thinking I knew everything and I really needed to be broken down and remolded and he did a good job.”

218 Third, male respondents had clear attitudes toward working with females. M-7 joked that males at his firm are “at
219 the disadvantage” because “it’s mostly female.” M-11 said that taking instruction from a woman never bothered him:
220 “Looking back I really thank her because . . . I still wouldn’t know what I was doing.” On the other hand, some male
221 respondents select female protégés because they perceive them as less threatening than males. Said M-1: “[T]here is
222 a lot less competition there, I think . . . [T]he greatest roadblock for me is mentoring somebody that I see as being as
223 aggressive as I am . . . I don’t want this person to steal my limelight.”

224 5. Conclusions and discussion

225 While the benefits of mentoring may be perceived as “given,” a detailed examination of factors that explain successful
226 mentoring in public relations – and a longitudinal perspective on how mentoring facilitates career enhancement over
227 time – has remained elusive. We know that mentoring relationships are fragile (e.g., [Scandura, 1998](#)) and factors offered
228 by respondents reveal key antecedents and consequences which can be used to enhance and to promote the mentoring
229 strategy. Moreover, the current study builds on [Tam et al.’s \(1995\)](#) analysis of mentoring as a gendered activity. This
230 is especially important now that our field is no longer gender diverse.

231 Findings here suggest that public relations mentors are well-positioned to help protégés advance in five important
232 ways: (1) mentors supplement protégés’ college classroom training by offering contextual skill-enhancement oppor-
233 tunities, (2) mentors validate and empower protégés as they grow into counselors charged to lead others and to fulfill
234 public relations’ management function, (3) mentors point out protégés’ image and behavior detractors that could stunt
235 assimilation or status growth, (4) mentors open their networks to protégés, and (5) protégés experience substantial
236 benefits from mentoring and later reciprocate by mentoring others.

237 According to the 40 public relations practitioners interviewed, mentoring reflects and perpetuates gendered social
238 roles. Overall, female respondents primarily think of mentoring as an anxiety-reduction, coping mechanism. For males,
239 mentoring is a means for career advancement, as reflected in terms used to describe their styles. These findings concur
240 with earlier studies of mentoring according to gender (e.g., [Ragins, 2002](#)), with females giving and receiving greater
241 levels of psycho-social support (enhanced sense of competence and self-image through role modeling, friendship,
242 counseling, acceptance, confirmation) and males receiving and giving other males greater levels of career support
243 (sponsorship, exposure, visibility, coaching, challenging assignments).

244 Of particular concern among these findings are perceptions that males (predominantly) are more advantageous as
245 mentors, females’ within-gender discord (lack of support, personality conflicts, cloning tendencies) which counteracts
246 positive attributes of gender matching in vertical dyads, and male respondents’ partnering with female mentors or
247 protégés to avoid direct competition with other males which underscores perceptions that females (as a group) are
248 non-threatening due to their low status. Three suggestions are offered to public relations practitioners:

- 249 1. Clearly, attracting more males to the pool of public relations practitioners suggests greater diversity for
250 mentor–protégé choice.
- 251 2. Female practitioners need the same kind of career support mentoring (as opposed to predominantly psycho-social
252 mentoring) that males receive in order to reach the highest levels in public relations management.
- 253 3. Organizations should consider developing formal mentoring guidelines, attending to key factors identified as critical
254 to mentoring success and carefully shaping vertical dyads to enhance outcomes (e.g., [Scandura, 1998](#)).

255 No study is without limitations. Importantly, comments expressed by respondents are not generalizable and instead
256 should be regarded as a point of departure for follow-up hypothesis testing. All four interviewees were White females,
257 middle-class, educated, heterosexual, and U.S. residents. Other results may have been obtained had the composition
258 of researchers been different. Moreover, males may have had more opportunities to have mentors and to mentor others
259 given that males interviewed had, on average, twice the number of years’ experience of females interviewed.

260 Researchers of mentoring in public relations barely have scratched the surface. Future studies might involve lon-
 261 gitudinal analyses of specific gender- and ethnicity-matched vertical dyad pairs to examine interplay of difference,
 262 interpersonal dynamics, and psycho-social and career support variables. Finally, perspectives of respondents training
 263 in public relations beyond U.S. borders may add a richer dimension to mentor–protégé vertical dyad research.

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