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Who is your ideal mentor? An exploratory study of mentor prototypes

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Abstract

Purpose – One of the main aspects of a mentoring relationship involves the expectations that mentees have of an ideal mentor. However, the traits that mentees envision in an ideal mentor are unclear. The purpose of this paper is to present series of studies examined mentees' ideas about their ideal mentor's physical characteristics and mentoring functions. The authors also examined gender and racial (white/nonwhite) differences in ideal mentor preferences.

Design/methodology/approach – The two studies examined what mentees envision when they picture their ideal mentor, and whether the ideal mentor prototypes varied by participants' ethnicity and gender. Study 2 further examined mentees' ideal mentor characteristics in a forced choice ranking scale and the ideal mentor scale (Rose, 2003).

Findings – When asked to describe their ideal mentor's appearance, participants provided detailed descriptions of the ideal mentor's features. They also emphasized mentoring characteristics and behaviors, such as guidance. Participants' preferences for their ideal mentor's gender and race varied by the question format (open-ended description vs scale).When asked to envision their ideal mentor (Study 2), participants emphasized guidance, interpersonal warmth, and ethical integrity. Other mentoring characteristics and behaviors emerged in the content coding framework. Prototypes of the ideal mentors varied based on ethnicity and gender, but also on how the question was presented.

Originality/value – These findings suggest that the ideal mentor prototype involves guidance, understanding, and role modeling ethical values. Like other organizational roles (i.e. leaders), awareness of these traits informs how employees view mentors and what they expect from mentoring relationships. Facilitators of mentoring programs can consider the ideal mentor prototype during the matching process and the initial stages of the mentoring relationship.

Keywords Mentoring, Employees, Organizational behaviour

Paper type Research paper

Kram (1985) defined a mentor as an experienced individual who provides career guidance and personal support to a less experienced individual. Although this definition outlines the general roles of a mentor, it does not elaborate on the mentee's perspective. That is, in the eyes of a potential mentee, who is a mentor? We address this question by exploring the possibility of a mentor prototype.

Lord (1985) described a prototype as "the most widely shared features or attributes of category members" (p. 93). Current literature demonstrates that these prototypes are influential for various organizational roles (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2013; Perry, 1994), yet the mentor prototype is unclear. In investigating prospective mentees' expectations of

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mentors, we first examined whether an ideal mentor prototype exists. Second, we examined what kinds of behaviors the ideal mentor conveys. Third, we examined how the ideal mentor prototype differs among members of racial and gender minority groups.

Using the mentee's perspective opens novel possibilities to mentoring theory and practice. This approach is a shift from research on mentoring outcomes and functions (Lankau *et al.*, 2007; Noe, 1988a) to the qualities most salient to the person receiving mentoring. In understanding the ideal mentor prototype, facilitators of mentoring programs can anticipate the mentee's perspective and incorporate managing these expectations into the developmental stages of mentoring relationships. Understanding what mentees value can also encourage mentors to convey certain mentoring behaviors. In this paper we present two initial studies designed to examine these ideas. Note that because we considered this research to be exploratory, we formed no hypotheses but used related literature, reviewed below, to guide general research questions.

Literature review and research questions

The focus of mentoring research has shifted from exploring mentoring functions to the dyadic aspects of mentor and mentee interactions (Ghosh *et al.*, 2011; Wanberg *et al.*, 2003). Not all mentoring is created equal; investigations have focussed on, for example, the features of formal mentoring programs that could enhance outcomes (Finkelstein and Poteet, 2007), and the characteristics of people and situations that could produce negative outcomes (Eby *et al.*, 2000).

The mentee's expectations for the mentoring relationship are a powerful driver of its success (Allen *et al.*, 2006; Finkelstein and Poteet, 2007). Mentorships are based on mutual expectations, where the mentee and mentor contribute to meeting each other's goals for the relationship (Young and Perrewé, 2004). Initially, it is important for mentees to seek out potential mentors with characteristics that suit the mentee's needs (Lee *et al.*, 2006). The extent to which the mentor meets the mentee's expectations can influence the relationship (Sosik and Godshalk, 2004). When mentors fail to meet mentee's expectations, negative mentoring or other unintended outcomes may occur for the mentoring dyad, as well as decreased organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Haggard, 2012).

Given the importance of expectations in mentorships, we examine prospective mentees' earliest expectations of their future ideal mentor's characteristics and behaviors. Although mentees often have an idealized image of their mentors initially (Kram, 1983), what is typically envisioned as the ideal mentor is unknown. Furthermore, it is unclear what mentor qualities are more salient in the idealized image, and thus more strongly prioritized than others. The specific qualities examined in the present research paper include physical features, mentoring functions, and diversity.

Physical features

Physical characteristics are a part of other organizational role prototypes, such as the masculine features (e.g. height and build) often envisioned in leaders (Lord *et al.*, 1986). Visibly salient cues tend to dominate first impressions (Fiske *et al.*, 1999; Naumann *et al.*, 2009). Further, this expectation of what a mentor should look like – the "package" that the ideal mentor is expected to come in – may influence the initial impression of the mentor and his/her capabilities. For example, envisioning the mentor as older could

correspond with an expectation that a mentor has a lot of experience and wisdom; youthful features may be associated with beliefs about inexperience (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2013):

RQ1. What physical features do individuals visualize in the ideal mentor prototype?

Mentoring behaviors

Much of the mentoring literature describes the mentoring behaviors using mentoring functions: career development and psychosocial support (Scandura and Williams, 2001). Career functions involve introducing the mentee to new opportunities, assigning challenging goals, and providing coaching. When providing psychosocial support, the mentor serves as an accepting counselor, positive role model, and friend. Although these functions are a useful framework for the mentor's roles, there may be other valued behaviors or nuances to the behaviors outlined in the function model that have been overlooked. For example, prospective mentees frequently emphasize a calm and accepting interpersonal approach in their ideal mentors (Rose, 2003). Examining the mentoring behaviors that mentees value can help verify or refine the meaning of mentoring to mentees. The current study's use of mixed methods is an opportunity for mentees to define the mentor's behaviors themselves and quantitatively indicate what behaviors they most strongly value:

RQ2. How do individuals' ideal mentor prototypes correspond with the existing mentoring functions?

Diversity and ideal mentor prototypes

Formal mentoring programs continue to become a central part of facilitating career advancement and promoting positive relationships among an increasingly diverse workforce (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2011). Broadly speaking, mentoring relationships have different meaning and unique challenges for minority groups. Female and nonwhite mentees could have expectations for the ideal mentor prototype that correspond with meeting these challenges. For female mentees, a female mentor can serve as a competent, successful role model for overcoming challenges in her career (Noe, 1988b). Alternatively, female mentees' ideal mentor could be male, as a male mentor may be in a position of organizational power and able to provide career advancement resources (Ragins, 1997).

Nonwhite employees' unique career challenges suggest corresponding trends in their ideal mentor. Initially, access to a professional mentor can be challenging for nonwhite mentees (Thomas, 1990). Furthermore, opportunities for a mentor of the same race are often limited, especially at higher organizational levels. Unlike white mentees, nonwhite mentees must often develop interpersonal trust and communication despite differences in their experiences (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2011). When the mentor and mentee are of dissimilar backgrounds, developing the trust and affiliative aspects of psychosocial support mentoring can be difficult (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2011). Subsequently, mentees in different-race mentoring dyads tend to receive less psychosocial support than their same-race dyads (James, 2000). In anticipating these challenges, nonwhite mentees may emphasize similarity and supportive behaviors more than white individuals when describing their ideal mentor (Allen and Eby, 2003):

RQ3. How does the ideal mentor prototype differ by the prospective mentee's gender and race?

Study 1

Study 1 was purely exploratory. We used an inductive process, examining categories emerging from open-ended data, and then examined the themes by demographics of participants. We also included close-ended questions on preferences for the mentor's age, gender, and race. This methodology helped meet the primary goal of understanding what qualities individuals envision in a mentor, with closed-ended questions to examine the strength of these preferences (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This approach also reflects common ways mentees indicate their preferences for mentors in formal programs, enhancing ecological validity.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were 109 students enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course at a large Midwestern university. The sample included 71 male and 38 female participants. Approximately 55 percent of participants reported as white, 26 percent African American, 7 percent Asian, 7 percent Latino/Latina, 1 percent Native American, and 2 percent other. Ages ranged from 18 to 27 ($M = 19.20$, SD = 1.48).

Measures

Open-ended measures. Two open-ended items were created to investigate participants' expectations and preferences in mentoring relationships. This approach was somewhat similar to the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), with participants providing "extreme positive" examples of exceptional mentoring, rather than reporting their previous mentoring experiences, as our goal was to ascertain the ideal and not the typical.

Participants read the following definition: "A mentor is an individual who takes a personal interest in your career; who guides, sponsors, or otherwise has a positive and significant influence on your professional career development. Please take a few minutes to envision your ideal mentor" (Allen and Finkelstein, 2003; Noe, 1988a, b). Following this preface, participants were asked two questions (in counterbalanced order): "Describe your ideal mentor in great detail. Please include everything you envisioned about your ideal mentor"; and "Imagine that you are at work and you're about to meet with your mentor for the first time today. You're sitting at your desk when you hear a knock at the door. You walk over and open the door. Describe what this person looks like."

Closed-ended questions. Participants then stated their preference for mentors in terms of gender (female, male, or no preference), race/ethnicity (African American, Asian, Latino/Latina, Native American, Caucasian, other, or no preference), and age (categories ranging in five-year segments from 20 years younger to 20 years older, with same age as the midpoint, and an option for no preference). Following each demographic preference question, participants were required to rate the strength of their preference from no preference to strong preference (five-point scale).

Open-ended content coding

We selected phrase as the unit of analysis to capture one independent thought per statement. Each phrase was transcribed and organized by case number, question number, gender, and ethnicity/race. We used an inductive process, allowing the categories to emerge from the data rather than imposing categories a priori (Miles and

Huberman, 1994). After each coder worked independently and without knowledge of the participant's demographics, the group of three coders met to clarify category definitions, and reach agreement about the coding of each phrase. If coders could not reach a consensus or the phrase was vague, it was categorized as unclear.

Results

There were a total of 1,165 phrases provided by our 109 participants. Note that throughout this paper we describe total numbers of phrases in different categories rather than numbers of participants producing phrases in each category. There were 25 statements categorized as unclear, yielding 1,140 statements that were categorized. There were a total of 39 distinct themes.

Physical features. Participants frequently described their ideal mentor's physical features in vivid detail (see Table I for themes). One of the most frequent physical features themes was dress, which included statements referring to the clothing and accessories that the mentor would be wearing to during their initial mentoring meeting. In describing dress, participants often conveyed the mentor's sophistication and high career status (e.g. "They are wearing a business suit, shirt, tie, coat, the whole deal. Nice polished shoes"). These statements ranged from general style statements to specific colors and brands of clothing. Although we did directly ask for a visual description, the level of detail regarding the clothing was somewhat surprising.

Features were another frequent theme, which referred to physical appearance descriptions that were independent of dress, build, and ethnicity. Again, these phrases often included very specific hairstyles and feature types (e.g. "he's got short hair, which is spiked, and he has a goatee").

Another relevant physical feature was age. In the open-ended responses, participants made 56 statements about the mentor's age. For example, one statement about their mentors' age was, "old enough to have valuable experience to impart." In the closed-ended questions about age, 76 percent of participants desired an older

Table I. Themes in qualitative descriptions related to physical and demographic characteristics

Theme	Number of phrases Study 1	Study 2	Example
Dress	107	2	"This person is well-dressed, casual, but not too casual"
Features	96	2	"She has dark, brown hair pulled back in a clip"
Build	67	1	"Average framed woman, not skinny"
Age	56	2	"[…] of middle age, maybe early 40s"
Gender	52	2	"I would like this person to be a man"
Smile	24	0	"This person would have a great smile that brightens up the entire room"
Ethnicity	11	0	"My mentor is African American"
Educated	6	3	"He would have an MBA from a prestigious school of business"
Is a specific person	6	3	"My ideal mentor would be someone like Bill Gates"
No preference	6	1	"I don't really care what the mentor's gender is"
Religious	6	0	"I would also like them to have a religious background"
Family	4	0	"For his personal life, he is a caring and loving husband and father"

mentor, with the most commonly selected age category being between six and ten years older than the participant.

Correspondence with mentoring behaviors. We coded participants' ideal mentor descriptions for desired mentoring behaviors and personality characteristics. Based on the emerging themes, we developed two broad categories of these themes: the mentor's personality characteristics (Table II) and the mentor's relationship with the mentee (Table III). Although there was some overlap between the table's categories, the heuristic we used was whether adding "to me" was logical for a mentoring relationship (e.g. encouraging to me).

One of the most frequent themes was guides me, which is a quintessential mentoring behavior (Ragins and Kram, 2007). This guidance often involved a personal, one-on-one level of guidance that focussed on the mentee's development and future decisions (e.g. "guides me to making the right decisions on life"). Many participants connected guidance to career knowledge. For example, participants often described how their ideal mentor would help them learn from challenges and obstacles, but also protect them throughout various career experiences.

There were some themes that seemed unique from what may be typically thought to be essential elements of good mentoring. For example, a theme of fun emerged from

Theme	Number of phrases Study 1	Study 2	Example
Caring	50	7	"Truly cares for the good of everyone instead of himself/herself"
Knowledgeable	49	57	"[…] knowledgeable, able to know what he is talking about"
Goal oriented	42	6	"Works hard to achieve his/her goals"
Nice	40	39	"Someone who is kind"
Confidence	29	6	"I want to be a high achiever, so I also wouldn't want my mentor to be threatened by me"
Successful	24	8	"Has a successful career at a young age"
Fun	23	7	"He likes to crack jokes"
Moral	22	20	"[…] have good morals and values"
Easygoing	18	13	"Lets their employees do their work"
Positive affect	15	6	"[…] can still help others with a good attitude"
Communication skills	13	10	"Able to communicate that knowledge clearly"
Image	13	4	"They would look, act, and sound very professional"
Fearless	12	8	"Not just state the corporate line"
Extraverted	12	0	"She will be very outgoing"
Creative	5	1	"[…] I would like a mentor who can come up with new/creative ideas to fuel thought"
Personality	5	1	"And have a good personality"
Creative	5	1	"[…] I would like a mentor who can come up with new/creative ideas to fuel thought"
Passion for work	4	2	"Shows a real passion for the job"
A leader	2	8	"Someone with great leadership skills"
A teacher[a]	0	15	"Have a talent for teaching"
Organized[a]	0	11	"He's reliable, dependable […]"
Well-rounded[a]	0	4	"He has been through it all"

Table II. Themes in qualitative descriptions related to personality characteristics

Theme	Number of phrases Study 1	Study 2	Example
Guides me	126	34	"My mentor would be able to help me with my problems by listening and providing examples of his past experience"
Career-relevant experience	39	13	"My ideal mentor should be in the career field that I would like to pursue"
Like me	36	4	"Someone that I would be able to relate with […]"
Share a personal relationship	27	3	"Not only be my mentor, but a friend"
Admirable	26	6	"[…] someone who I can look up to and admire"
Interested in me	22	18	"Wants me to learn to the best of my ability"
Easy to talk to	18	15	"He/she would be someone that I would feel comfortable going to in seeking advice, and therefore would be easy to talk to"
Available	17	9	"Available when needed or willing to set aside a scheduled time to meet with me"
Superior	4	3	"He/she would be more senior"
Encouraging[a]	0	13	"Very motivational and empowering at all times"
Candid[a]	0	11	"Not afraid to be critical"
Provides feedback[a]	0	7	"Offering feedback (both positive and negative) in a consistent and helpful manner"
Understanding[a]	0	54	"He must also be understanding and remember what it was like to be a trainee"
Personality	5	1	"And have a good personality"
Understanding[a]	0	54	"He must also be understanding and remember what it was like to be a trainee"

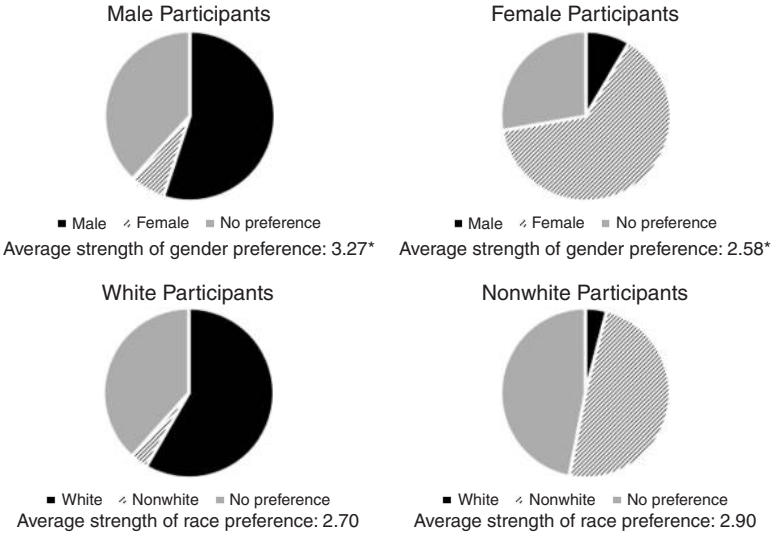
Note: [a]Newly created theme for Study 2

Table III. Themes in qualitative descriptions related to the relationship with the mentee

phrases about the mentor's sense of humor, ability to laugh, and have a good time. Similarly, an unexpected theme was fearless, which refers to the mentor's ability to be assertive in what he or she wants. Participants also frequently emphasized their relationship with the mentor (e.g. interested in me; "my ideal mentor is excited about you and your path").

Diversity and the ideal mentor prototype. We were interested in whether female and nonwhite participants' preferred a mentor with similar demographic characteristics. We took multiple approaches to asking about these preferences, using both closed-ended and open-ended questions where they described whatever characteristics came to mind. These two methodologies provided interesting comparisons, as revealed below.

Gender was a frequent theme in the open-ended descriptions; 89 percent of phrases about a male mentor were made by male participants, and 66 percent of female mentor phrases from female participants. In the closed-ended gender preference item, a χ^2 test on participant gender and mentor gender preference was significant, χ^2 (2) = 41.24, $p < 0.001$. The majority of male participants preferred a male mentor (64.8 percent), whereas the majority of female participants preferred a female mentor (52.6 percent). A one-way ANOVA on the strength of this preference showed a significant difference between male participants and female participants, F (1,107) = 6.57, $p = 0.01$. Male participants' gender preferences for their mentor was stronger than female participants'. Refer to Figure 1 for descriptive statistics for both gender and race/ethnicity preferences.



Note: *$p < 0.05$

Figure 1.
Study 1 preferences for mentor gender by participant gender

Ethnicity/race was not a frequent theme in the open-ended descriptions. However, the vast majority of the ethnicity phrases were made by nonwhite participants (91 percent of ethnicity phrases) compared to white participants (9 percent). For the closed-ended item on race/ethnicity preference, a χ^2 test on participant race and mentor race preference was significant, $\chi^2\,(2) = 47.42, p < 0.001$. The majority of white participants (58.3 percent) preferred a white mentor, whereas the majority of nonwhite participants preferred a nonwhite mentor (49 percent). There was no significant difference between white and nonwhite participants on preference strength, $F\,(1,107) = 0.46,\ p = 0.50$. In the open-ended descriptions, nonwhite participants specified a race/ethnicity preference more often than white participants did. However, when asked specifically about ethnicity preference, white participants preferred a white mentor slightly, and nonwhite participants preferred a nonwhite mentor.

Analyzing the order of the phrases. We organized the phrases by the order that participants described them, and examined how the theme of the first phrase differed by different demographic groups[1]. We would infer that participants described these qualities first because they were most pertinent to their ideal mentor.

The most frequent themes in participants' first statements were dress (8.93 percent), gender (8.65 percent), and build (7.49 percent). Each of these themes involved the mentor's physical image. Although gender statements decreased in popularity in the second and third statements, participants continued to discuss build and dress in subsequent statements. Similarly, features increased in popularity across the first three phrases (5.19, 10.91, and 12 percent, respectively).

In addition to physical features, another frequent theme in participants' first statements was guides me (7.20 percent). This theme continued to emerge in participants' second and third statements (8.18 percent and 10 percent, respectively). In their second statements, participants frequently described their relationship with their ideal mentor. Specifically, interested in me and share a personal relationship were

more frequent in participants' second statements (5.45 and 2.73 percent) than in participants' first or third statements. Participants also described their ideal mentor's standing in the organization more in their second and third statements than their first statements. The themes of goal oriented and admirable increased in participants' subsequent statements.

Study 2

As Study 1 used an inductive approach, we attempted to confirm our findings using a sample of full-time employees. Additionally, we reframed the open-ended question about the ideal mentor description to emphasize the mentor's appearance less, and more broadly on mentor characteristics.

Method

Participants. We recruited 104 participants via Amazon's Mechanical Turk , an online, open-source forum for online samples (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2011). The participants verified their full-time employment status, US residency, and fluency in English. In all, 50 participants were male and 54 participants were female. There were 74 white participants and 30 nonwhite participants. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 74 ($M = 33.91$, SD = 11.24).

Measures

Open-ended. Participants were provided with the same definition as in Study 1. Participants then answered the question, "What would be your ideal mentors' characteristics? Please include everything you envisioned about your ideal mentor."

Closed-ended. To determine what qualities participants prioritized in their ideal mentor, we asked them to rank these popular characteristics. Participants ranked their preference for ten characteristics their ideal mentor could possess. These characteristics included: has a good sense of humor; fearless; and is similar to me. We chose the characteristics for ranking based on emerging themes in the content coding framework developed in Study 1.

To assess the importance of mentor behaviors, participants completed the ideal mentor scale of a broad range of mentoring behaviors (Rose, 2003). The ideal mentor scale was designed to measure qualities and behaviors students valued in an academic measure; we adapted the instructions to use in a broader context. The scale consisted of three subscales: integrity (14 items, e.g. "be a role model"; $\alpha = 0.91$); guidance (ten items, e.g. "meet with me on a regular basis"; $\alpha = 0.88$); and relationship (ten items, e.g. "relate to me as if he/she is a responsible, admirable older sibling"; $\alpha = 0.84$). Participants rated the importance of each mentor behavior on a five-point scale (not at all important to extremely important).

Open-ended content coding

We used the same coding procedure as in Study 1. Of the 487 statements, there were 18 (3.7 percent) that were labeled unclear due to being vague, or the coders could not reach agreement on category placement. There were 487 statements from the open-ended data sorted into 47 categories. Participants' responses ranged from providing one phrase ($n = 3$, 2.9 percent) to involving 12 phrases ($n = 1$, 1 percent). The most frequent numbers of phrases per participant was nine phrases ($n = 19$), four phrases ($n = 18$), and five phrases ($n = 16$).

Results

Physical characteristics. Unlike Study 1, Study 2 did not include a question directly asking for what the mentee would see when they opened the door. Consequently, the phrases in Study 2 pertained much less to physical features and much more to mentoring behaviors and characteristics than did Study 1. However, even with this change, Study 2 participants often described their ideal mentor as having a put-together, fashionable appearance and having a fit physical build.

Mentoring behaviors. Participants often emphasized a combination of career-related skills (e.g. experience, success) and personable qualities conducive to psychosocial support (e.g. understanding, encouraging). The most frequent themes were: knowledgeable (57 statements, 11.7 percent), understanding (54 statements, 11.1 percent), and nice (39 statements, 8 percent).

Understanding was a newly created category emerging in Study 2. Understanding refers to the ideal mentor's patience and empathy for the mentee. An understanding mentoring style is similar to the psychosocial support mentoring function, as it involves recognizing the mentee's current needs and situation, supporting the mentee, and reaffirming his/her confidence. Phrases in the nice category referred to the ideal mentor's approachability, kindness, and consideration for others (including the mentee). These qualities facilitate the friendship and counseling aspects of psychosocial support.

As in Study 1, we examined the order of the phrases as a proxy for emphasis. Overall within the first phrase, 16 (15.4 percent) of the phrases had the knowledgeable theme, 14 (13.5 percent) had understanding, and 12 (11.5 percent) had nice. As participants' ideal mentor descriptions continued, the theme guides me increased in participants' second (7.7 percent) and third phrases (7.7 percent). Similarly, interested in me increased in popularity from the first phrase (2.9 percent) to the second phrase (5.8 percent) that participants described. Examining the frequent themes of the fourth and fifth phrases, the themes of communication skills and easy to talk to both increased in popularity compared to the first phrases in participants' descriptions.

Participants' ranking responses also helped examine the prioritization of these popular characteristics. Regarding the most important ranking, there were 45 participants (42.50 percent) who selected work knowledge, 31 (28.85 percent) for understanding, and 16 (15.38 percent) for ethical. The qualities that were selected as the most important the least frequently were fearless (3, 2.88 percent), humor (2, 1.92 percent), and similar to me (2, 1.92 percent).

Diversity. Although there was roughly an equal number of men and women in the study, there were some modest gender differences in the descriptions (226 statements from male participants, 261 from female participants). Female participants often described their ideal mentor as someone with leadership and professional skills. For instance, female participants described their mentor as a leader (6, 2.3 percent), more than male participants (2, 0.9 percent). Similarly, there were more statements about the ideal mentor as organized from female participants (8, 3.1 percent) than from male participants (3, 1.3 percent). Female participants made slightly more statements about the ideal mentor being goal oriented (5, 1.9 percent) compared to male participants (1, 0.4 percent).

Understanding was a somewhat frequent theme among both white (16 statements; 10.5 percent) and nonwhite participants (38 statements, 11.3 percent). To fully examine the meaning of the understanding theme, we compared the related themes among white

and nonwhite participants. When white participants described their ideal mentor as understanding, communication skills (4.8 percent) and providing feedback (3.6 percent) were also frequent themes. Nonwhite participants who described their ideal mentor as understanding did not mention communication skills (2.9 percent) and providing feedback (0.6 percent) as frequently as white participants. In examining nonwhite participants' understanding descriptions in more detail, other frequent themes involved the kind of role model the mentor would be, such as guides me (6.4 percent), moral (5.2 percent) a teacher (3.5 percent), and a leader (1.2 percent).

In the close-ended ranking items, nonwhite participants' and white participants' both selected understanding, work knowledge, and ethical as the most important characteristic the most frequently. There were no nonwhite participants who ranked similar to me as one of the top three important characteristics. However, eight white participants (5.4 percent) did rank this characteristic as a top three most important characteristic.

Ideal mentor scale. The ideal mentor scale provided an additional set of closed-ended questions, and helped further examine gender and racial differences in ideal mentor preferences. This measure was especially relevant because of the low-base rate of some themes in the open-ended comments. We conducted independent samples *t*-tests examine differences in men and women's ideal mentor qualities. There was a significant gender difference on the integrity composite, $t\ (102) = 2.32$, $p = 0.02$ with female participants valuing their ideal mentor's integrity significantly more than male participants. There was no significant difference between male and female participants on the guidance, $t\ (102) = 0.65$, $p = 0.52$ or relationship factors, $t\ (102) = 0.72$, $p = 0.47$. There were no significant differences between white and nonwhite participants on the ideal mentor scale.

As an exploratory analysis of convergent validity, we integrated the ideal mentor scale with corresponding themes in individuals' open-ended descriptions. Specifically, we compared ideal mentor scale responses (using a median split groups for each subscale) to the themes in participants' first phrases. The median split served as a proxy for high/low emphasis. Among participants with above median ideal mentor integrity scores (4.28), moral was a more frequent initial theme (9.3 percent) than those in the below-median group (2.0 percent). Interestingly, guides me was a more frequent initial theme in the below-median ideal mentor scale guidance ratings (4.7 percent) than the above-median ratings (2.5 percent). For the relationship subscale, participants in the above-median group, a leader (7.5 percent) was a more frequent theme than the below-median group (2.0 percent). Overall, participants' quantitative ratings of ideal mentor behaviors often converged with their qualitative descriptions, which strengthened the convergent validity of the ideal mentor scale.

General discussion

In the current study, the ideal qualities and behaviors of a mentor were defined by those who receive mentoring. When visualizing their ideal mentor, participants often described the mentor's clothing and physical features, which was often a put-together, professional appearance. Considering first impressions, a mentor who dresses professionally likely has knowledge and guidance to impart for the mentee's success (e.g. Naumann *et al.*, 2009). Given that knowledgeable was also a frequent theme in both studies, perhaps business attire was an initial indication of the ideal mentor's career knowledge and status. Furthermore, a knowledgeable mentor could

also be informed about career opportunities and offer strategic guidance for the mentee's opportunities.

We examined trends in the order of the themes to learn individuals' priorities for their ideal mentor. Physical features and gender were popular themes in participants' first statements, yet gender decreased in frequency among the second and third statements. Participants further described their ideal mentor by very specific details (e.g. hair style). Themes related to guidance and mentoring relationships (e.g. interested in me) also increased in frequency across participants' descriptions. Overall, the timing of these themes suggests that participants first described who their mentor would be, followed by what their mentor would do in an ideal mentoring relationship.

In both studies, participants emphasized valuable friendship and interpersonal qualities, such as a sense of humor, approachability, and friendliness. Indeed, 69 percent of participants in a recent study rated personality fit as important in a formal mentoring relationship (James *et al.*, 2015). When participants described the mentor's investment in the relationship, they may have sought both career advocacy and social support. An enthusiastic, understanding mentor could convey accessibility and encourage a meaningful connection. This finding is consistent with previous research, where 72 percent of participants valued an available mentor (James *et al.*, 2015.).

In Study 1, participants often mentioned the mentor's gender in their descriptions. In both types of questions, female participants more often preferred a female mentor to a male mentor. They may have used gender as a way to promote similarity, which could enhance the mentoring relationship (Allen and Eby, 2003). However, in Study 2, female participants also valued leadership and organizational skills in their ideal mentor. Perhaps having a female mentor could promote similarity and connection, yet a mentor with strong career skills could provide advancement opportunities.

Although white participants also preferred a similar mentor in the closed-ended questions, they did not specify this preference in their descriptions the way that nonwhite participants did. As white individuals are frequently the majority group, perhaps they did not initially consider that the mentor prototype would be a race other than their own (Thomas, 1990). It is plausible that White participants were visualizing White mentors, and assumed that the mentor would match their race. Conversely, Nonwhite participants may have anticipated that mentors are typically dissimilar from them (Thomas, 1990). Specifying racial similarity was an opportunity to address the frequent challenge of finding and establishing a mentoring relationship (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the Study 2 results suggest subtle differences in expectations for the mentor's interpersonal style. It appears that for White participants, an understanding ideal mentor was someone who could coach them and provide feedback on career progress. However, among Nonwhite participants, an understanding mentor often provides empathy, guidance, and strong values.

Implications

The mentee's idealization of the mentor is inevitably compared to the actual mentor relationship (Storrs *et al.*, 2008; Young and Perrewé, 2004). By examining the prospective mentees' visualizations and expectations of mentors, facilitators of mentoring programs can further understand this consequential aspect of mentoring relationships and promote clear expectations (Finkelstein and Poteet, 2007). For example, mentees and mentors could share their ideas and expectations on mentoring as an initial conversation for establishing realistic expectations and goals for the

relationship (Storrs *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, practitioners who understand what prospective mentees visualize and expect in a mentor can use these trends to coach mentees on how to initiate mentoring relationships and prioritize their ideal mentor expectations. In using these findings, practitioners could convey the importance of clear and realistic mentor expectations.

Regarding the question "whom do individuals prefer for their mentor?" it not only depends who is asked, but how the question is asked. First, there were different trends in how White and Nonwhite participants stated their demographic preferences. Second, it appears that the writing prompt for "envisioning" the ideal mentor encouraged participants to think about a prototype of mentoring behaviors and characteristics, rather than physical appearance. These findings are especially relevant to designing formal mentoring programs, which often begin by asking for mentees' preferences. In designing such programs, organizations should consider how the types of questions affect their employees' answers.

The mentor's interest and availability for the mentee appears to be a part of the mentee's earliest expectations. Study 2 participants often emphasized the mentor's efforts for the relationship. Similarly, constraints on mentoring dyads (e.g. scheduling conflicts, physical distance) can limit the success of mentoring (Noe, 1988a). To anticipate this concern, facilitators of formal mentoring practitioners should emphasize this expectation to mentors.

Limitations and directions for future research

Although we established a categorization structure in Study 1, the student sample restricted the age range and workplace experience. However, the employee sample in Study 2 helped replicate this framework of key themes. These themes and expectations could also differ by other factors, such as the mentee's career stage. What may be valued in a mentor could change across the mentee's career stages and level of processional development.

This study informed the ideal mentor prototype, yet modifications to the methodology could clarify related questions. For instance, were individuals thinking of an actual mentor that they knew, or developing a prototype from the definition provided? This possibility could be examined using response times, as recalling an actual mentor may take less time. It is also unclear whether participants' descriptions of positive qualities were specific to the ideal mentor, or more broadly describe ideal qualities for other organizational roles. This possibility could be explored through interviews or other rich forms of data.

Although we compared the ideal mentor among White and Nonwhite participants, neither sample was large enough to be representative of specific racial and ethnic groups. Future research should emphasize diversity in their sample to further understand their preferences and experiences in mentoring relationships and match an increasingly diverse workforce.

Future research should examine how ideal mentor prototypes impact the development of mentoring relationships, especially when the mentor does not match the prototype. If first impressions do not match the mentee's expectations, it could negatively impact the start of the relationship and its ultimate success. Field studies could examine how this inconsistency influences the early formation of connection and trust in the dyad. A controlled setting could also allow for manipulating appearance and/or other characteristics of potential mentors and assessing participants' impressions of them.

Conclusion

Mentoring has been defined by its various functions and outcomes, yet is rarely defined by the mentee's earliest expectations. Overall, prospective mentees described a professional dress and behaviors, and also emphasized the mentor's guidance and investment in the relationship. There were subtle differences in these themes among women and nonwhite mentees. By knowing how the ideal mentor is defined by mentees, facilitators of formal mentoring programs can enrich the developmental stages of mentoring relationships.

Note

1. Due to a coding error, 24.77 percent of the participants' statements were not organized by the order in which the statements were made. These phrases were excluded from the analyses where we examined the order of the phrases. A χ^2 test demonstrated that there was no significant difference between the question type (description/visual image) and whether the phrase's order was known, $\chi^2\ (1) = 1.07$, $p = 0.30$.

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