An Examination of the Role of Age in Mentoring Relationships

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This study examined the role of both age and age diversity in mentorships using quantitative and qualitative methodology. Based on data from nonfaculty employees of a large university, it found that the absolute age of the protégé in mentorships influenced career mentoring provided, characteristics of the mentorship, and perceptions of mutual learning. Older protégés on average experienced less career-related mentoring, had shorter relationships, were closer in level to their mentor, and reported more mutual learning than younger protégés. Protégé age interacted with mentor age, however, such that young protégés seemed to receive similar styles of mentoring regardless of mentor age, but as protégés age increased, they reported more career and psychosocial mentoring from younger than from older mentors. The content analysis of qualitative data revealed important variables to investigate in future research on age diversity in mentorships, including perceptions of competence and respect, similarity, and interpersonal comfort.

Keywords: mentoring; aging and work; age diversity

A mentor is often described by researchers as a “a senior, experienced employee who serves as a role model, provides support, direction, and feedback to the younger [italics added] employee regarding career plans and interpersonal development” (Noe, 1988, p. 458). Indeed, early mentoring research characterized mentors as typically 8 to 15 years older than their protégés (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Although older mentors paired with younger protégés may still be the norm, changes encompassing today’s workplace, such as multiple lifetime career paths and a protean approach to career development (Hall & Mirvis, 1995), will likely
increase the occurrence of similar-age and reverse-age (i.e., mentor younger than protégé) mentorships (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999; Kram, 1996; Kram & Hall, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1996). Furthermore, interest in the development of alternative mentoring alliances, such as that among peers, signals a need to examine how age influences mentoring relationships (Allen et al., 1999; Eby, 1997; Kram & Isabella, 1985). However, there has been little research examining the effects of age diversity on the nature and outcomes of mentorships. This study was designed to stimulate research in this area.

**WHY STUDY AGE?**

Demographic forecasters predict the imminent "graying of America" as the largest segment of our population approaches old age (Barth, McNaught, & Rizzi, 1993; Ramsey, 1993). This phenomenon, coupled with the demise of linear career paths as the norm (Mirvis & Hall, 1996), suggests that more people will have multiple jobs or even careers in a lifetime and that there is an increasing likelihood that organizational newcomers will be older (Kram, 1996). One mechanism suggested as a way for older people to remain active in the workforce is to become a mentor to a less experienced member of an organization (Capowski, 1994; Hunt & Michael, 1983). However, some older workers may be more likely to find themselves in need of a mentor as they enter new fields or organizations.

Changing demographics in the workforce have increased research attention on the role of age in the workplace. Although a complete review of the age and work literature is beyond the scope of this article, a brief review of relevant themes is warranted. In the last few decades, much of the industrial psychology research on aging has indicated that chronological age is not a reliable predictor of work performance, and that performance may even improve with age in some job types, as might be expected with the accrualment of relevant experience (Warr, 1994). Furthermore, there is evidence that older employees may be more committed and less likely to exhibit voluntary absences and turnover than younger employees (Warr, 1994). However, despite both scholarly and popular articles touting the benefits of older workers, myths and stereotypes still abound that may influence employment-related decisions about older workers, especially when certain contextual and organizational factors are in place (Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999). Although research considering access discrimination (i.e., access to employment, training, etc.) continues to be of importance, it is also important to examine career-related issues for older workers (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Greller & Stroh, 1995; Mirvis & Hall, 1996; Rosen &
Jerdee, 1988). That is, once older people do get in the door of an organization or attain a new position, how does age influence factors such as day-to-day activities, interpersonal interactions, and career development? These issues loom large as organizations are increasingly faced with age diversity across organizational levels and departments.

Of particular relevance to mentoring relationships, researchers have also examined age issues in the workplace from a relational demography perspective. In their review of the organizational demography research, Tsui, Egan, and Xin (1995) defined relational demography as “an individual’s similarity to or difference from others in a group on specific demographic attributes” (p. 198). Tsui and her colleagues noted that field research in this area has examined age with regularity and concluded that age heterogeneity may negatively affect communication and group cohesion. They noted, however, the need to be cognizant of the importance of the level of analysis at which diversity is examined. That is, age may be a more central issue at a dyad level, especially in regard to supervisor-subordinate dyads, because of norms and expectations for supervisors to be older than subordinates. Work by Perry, Kulik, and Zhou (1999) expanded on this by noting the importance of considering status incongruence and violation of organizational age norms in making predictions regarding relational age effects.

We now narrow our focus to consider how mentoring relationships may be a key part of successful career development and more specifically why mentorships may be affected by age.

AGE AND MENTORING: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

As mentioned above, there has been little consideration of age diversity in mentoring relationships, most likely because the very notion of a mentor has been almost exclusively associated with being senior in age as well as experience. For example, Levinson et al. (1978) argued that ideally a mentor should be approximately half a generation older than a protégé (i.e., 8 to 15 years), because if the mentor is much older, the relationship may take on qualities of a parent and child relationship, and if the mentor is too close in age to the protégé, the pair may become more like friends or peers. Levinson et al. did entertain the notion of a successful mentor younger than a protégé, yet stated that special qualities would be required for this to work. However, the authors did not delineate these special qualities. Kram (1983) also assumed there will be challenges in creating mentorships when protégés are similar in age to or older than mentors and called for research to shed light on the nature of those challenges.
Some studies examining age as a control variable supported its importance in understanding mentoring relationships. For example, Ragins and McFarlin (1990) found that younger protégés were more likely to report that their mentor served in role modeling and parenting-type roles than were older protégés. Whitley, Dougherty, and Dreher (1992) also considered age to be of theoretical importance. Noting social norms for protégés to be young, they predicted and found support for the hypothesis that younger protégés would receive more career mentoring. They suggested that future research examine mentoring needs, nature, and quality to get a clearer picture of the role of protégé age. It should be noted that in both of these studies, there was no consideration of age diversity within the mentorship, nor was the age range provided. This provides us with an indication that the absolute age of a protégé may affect the nature of a mentorship, yet does not reveal the impact of age diversity in the partnership.

Feldman, Folks, and Turnley (1999) took a relational demography approach to examining the effects of age, gender, and race diversity in mentorships. They examined absolute amount of mentoring reported, and expected less mentoring as the age gap between the mentor and the protégé increased. No evidence was found for an age diversity effect. They suggested that perhaps age is not as important as other demographic variables, but noted that generalizability might be limited due to the specific nature of their sample (international internships). Furthermore, although this study represented a step in the right direction by examining age diversity within a mentorship pair, only absolute age differences, not differences in direction, were considered.

Clearly there is a need to consider the role of age in mentoring relationships in a more comprehensive manner. Below, we summarize our theoretical rationale for hypothesizing influences of the absolute age of protégé as well as of age diversity on various mentoring outcomes. After giving our rationale, we present our hypotheses and exploratory research questions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, HYPOTHESES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our examination of the role of age in mentoring relationships is couched largely in terms of Lawrence’s organizational theory of age (Lawrence, 1987, 1988). The essence of this theory is that “age distributions drive the development of age norms that produce age effects” (Lawrence, 1987, p. 37). Age distributions are the patterns of employee chronological age within an organization or within a particular role. Both the actual and the perceived
distribution of ages within an organization or role may lead to the development of age norms. Age norms are composed of shared assumptions concerning the "normal," or appropriate, ages of employees within a given organization or role. Developmental research has shown that there is fairly widespread agreement among individuals regarding what is "supposed to happen when" in regard to life events (Greller & Simpson, 1999). Expectations are violated when an individual is not in synch with the age norm associated with an organization or role. As Krueger, Heckhausen, and Hundertmark (1995) noted, "people are sensitive to social clocks and they use them to understand and judge others" (p. 91). The outcomes that occur in organizations as a result of employee age are broadly termed age effects by Lawrence (1987). Age effects can occur at a macro or micro level within an organization, and can be the result of either the direct, physiological processes of aging or social responses to the violations of age norms.

Lawrence’s age norm theory can be readily extended to the context of mentoring relationships in organizations. Application of the theory would be an example of treating age effects at an individual level (affecting an individual’s mentoring relationship) and due to indirect processes. The processes are indirect because there is no actual physiological reason why the mentors or protégés of atypical ages could not perform their roles, but instead there are normative expectations of the age that each should be in those respective roles. Because individuals tend to have shared perceptions regarding where people should be and what roles people should undertake in their career at particular ages, people are subject to judgment as to whether they are behind schedule, on track, or ahead of schedule (Greller & Simpson, 1999). Typically, mentoring others is viewed as a role taken on by someone senior who is passing on years of experience and wisdom, whereas the protégé role is that of a novice looking to learn, grow, and advance. An individual younger than expected who is mentoring others would probably be viewed as a “fast tracker.” On the other hand, a protégé older than what norms suggest might be seen as developmentally delayed or behind schedule (Krueger et al., 1995; Whiteley et al., 1992). Mentorships of reverse age (i.e., younger mentor paired with older protégé) may be marked by the perception of status incongruence (Perry et al., 1999), which could be uncomfortable to both parties. Because older people are normatively expected to be of higher status, when the higher status individual in the mentorship is younger and the lower status individual is older, the stage may be set for potentially negative age effects.

We can extend our theoretical framework further by drawing on the work of Perry and colleagues (Perry, 1997; Perry & Bouhris, 1998; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999) regarding the cognitive matching process between employee age and job stereotypes. Matching theory suggests that when
employment decisions are made, there is a cognitive matching process that occurs such that perceived features of the applicant are matched with perceived requirements of the job. Positive decisions are most likely made when a match is perceived. Although sometimes matching is based on actual individual attributes exhibited by the individual and actual needs of the job—a best-case scenario—matching of attributes can be based on group membership stereotypes and also possibly stereotypes of the job. For example, jobs can become age typed or sex typed based on the characteristics of people typically associated with those jobs.

Perry and colleagues suggested that age discrimination for employment selection can occur at two levels (Perry & Finkelstein, 1999). Direct matching can occur when age is matched to the stereotype of the job and found to be inconsistent, such as when an older person is applying for a job that is considered a young person’s job. Indirect matching can occur when age itself is not matched to the job, but when age elicits trait inferences that are then viewed as inconsistent with job information. For example, if age elicits a stereotype of being resistant to change and the job is one requiring being versed in new and changing technologies, a perceptual mismatch might occur.

Although this matching theory has been typically applied to access discrimination (e.g., hiring, promotions), it is also applicable to mentoring relationships. In this case, we are not talking about a job per se, but a role—the role of protégé. Because protégés have been typically younger, the role of protégé can be viewed as a young-typed role. Age effects (here in the view of a negative perception, and perhaps negative, or at least disparate, treatment of a protégé) could occur directly, in the sense that an older protégé does not match with the typical age of a protégé. It also could occur indirectly, such that the age of the older protégé may elicit negative stereotypes such as being resistant to change and hard to train, or perhaps even positive stereotypes such as being experienced. These stereotypes could then be matched to role information (e.g., the role of the protégé is to grow, learn, and advance). In this case, there is a clear mismatch occurring between the protégé and the role, which could lead to negative perceptions of this older protégé as well as treatment different from what would be afforded to a protégé who fit the role.

Along the same lines, it is possible that a matching process may occur such that a younger mentor is not perceived as matching his or her role well. A younger individual may elicit stereotypes of being inexperienced and naive; this certainly does not fit the typical characteristics of a mentor. However, it must be cautioned that there is evidence in the literature that the age-matching process is not necessarily symmetrical (Perry, Kulik, & Bouhirs, 1996). This also ties into Lawrence’s age norm theory as described above. People who are older than what they “should” be for a particular role may be

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seen as lagging behind expectations, but people who are younger than they “should” be are often viewed positively. However, when one considers some of the adjectives used to describe younger people in these roles (e.g., “hot shots”; Ramsey, 1993), one can see how an older person as a protégé in a non-traditional relationship may possibly doubt the qualifications of a younger mentor, or be resentful of the mentor’s status.

These two theoretical perspectives, quite similar in nature, together underscore that mentor-protégé relationships in which individuals do not fit age norms may be perceived in a negative manner by the members of the relationship as well as others. This could possibly have implications for the type of mentoring provided to protégés of varying ages as well as the outcomes for nontraditional age combinations. Hypotheses and research questions addressing these issues are outlined below.

Our predictions are organized first according to whether the focus is on the absolute age of the protégé or the age diversity in the protégé-mentor relationship. We present both theoretically derived hypotheses and exploratory research questions regarding (a) nature of mentoring, (b) characteristics of the mentorship, and (c) outcomes of mentoring. Finally, we also pose a question regarding the need for mentorship.

THE ROLE OF PROTÉGÉ ABSOLUTE AGE

*Nature of relationship.* Kram’s (1983, 1985) seminal work concerning mentoring relationships identified two distinct, but related functions provided by mentors: career and psychosocial. Career functions include aspects of the mentorship that prepare the protégé for career advancement, such as sponsorship, exposure, visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions are aspects of the relationship that enhance the protégé’s sense of competence and self-image, such as role modeling, providing friendship, counseling, acceptance, and confirmation. Subsequent work by Scandura and associates (Scandura, 1992; Scandura & Katerberg, 1988; Scandura & Ragins, 1993) suggested that role modeling be treated as a third unique mentoring function. Since people have been socialized to expect role models to be our elders, there is also some similarity between role modeling functions and parental types of behaviors. Because of this, we expect that younger protégés will report receiving more role modeling than will older protégés (Hypothesis 1). To the degree that there are common myths that older people have less potential for career development or are not a viable investment for the future (Finkelstein et al., 1995; Hall & Mirvis, 1995), we would expect less career-related mentoring to be provided to older individuals. Furthermore, as reported above, Whitely et al. (1992) found that
younger protégés reported receiving more career-related mentoring than did older protégés. Accordingly, we expect to replicate this finding (Hypothesis 2).

Characteristics of mentorship. Mentorships vary in characteristics in addition to the nature of the mentoring behaviors provided. For example, they differ in duration, frequency of interaction, organizational level of mentors and protégés, and formality of the relationship. Although each of these relationship characteristics is investigated or statistically controlled in our study, given the growing prevalence of formal mentoring programs within organizations, we are especially curious as to whether older protégés are more likely to be involved in formal or informal mentorships. A logical case can be made for either. First, if organizations view mentorships in traditional ways, only younger employees may be targeted for formal mentorship programs. Thus, we could see older protégés being more likely to be involved in informal relationships than formal ones. On the other hand, if older workers do not want to appear as if they need developmental support, they may be less likely to seek out informal mentorships or may only be involved in organizationally prescribed programs as a socialization requirement. Thus, we propose an exploratory research question: Will we find older protégés more often in formal or informal relationships than younger employees (Research Question 1)?

Mentoring outcomes. We believe that the age of the protégé may contribute to the overall quality of the mentoring relationship. Even if older protégés are in mentorships, they may feel uncomfortable in this nontraditional role. Being a protégé may make older employees feel as if they are not far enough advanced in their careers as they might have expected to be at that life stage. This struggle with the mismatch between expectations and the reality of their role could negatively affect the perceived quality of the relationship. Thus, we predict that older protégés will report a lower quality mentoring relationship than will younger protégés (Hypothesis 3).

THE ROLE OF AGE DIVERSITY

Nature of relationship. We noted that it is typically thought that the ideal age difference between a mentor and protégé is 8 to 15 years, with the mentor being older. Because the psychosocial functions of mentoring are close in nature to a friendship, and similarity-attraction theory suggests that interpersonal attraction is strongly influenced by similarity (Byrne, 1971), we
suggest that mentorships with less age diversity will be more likely to experience psychosocial functions than will mentorships with greater age diversity (Hypothesis 4). However, if there are strong norms regarding traditional age differences between mentors and protégés, it is possible that the career-related, psychosocial, and role modeling functions of mentoring would be subject to a curvilinear relationship with age differences, such that all may be reported as being provided less frequently when there is a large or a small age difference between the mentor and protégé (Research Question 2)? Furthermore, we examine whether the mentoring provided differs specifically in cases where the mentor is younger than the protégé (Research Question 3).

Mentoring outcomes. If there are indeed special challenges in mentorships consisting of nontraditional age combinations, then we would expect that protégés in mentorships with less age diversity would report a lower quality of relationship (Hypothesis 5). However, it is possible that if we were to consider a different type of relationship outcome measure, such as mutual learning (Allen, 1999), we would find that age might function differently. Specifically, if protégés are more similar in age to their mentors, a positive outcome might be that they learn more from each other (Kram, 1985). The traditional hierarchical nature of the mentoring relationship, with the mentor primarily in a teacher-like role, may not hold true in these nontraditional mentorships. Thus, we pose the following exploratory question: Will individuals involved in similar-age and reverse-age mentorships experience more mutual learning than will individuals in traditional hierarchical mentorships (Research Question 4)?

NEED FOR DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT

There is evidence in the literature on age stereotyping that a pervasive positive stereotype about older people is that they are experienced (Finkelstein, Higgins, & Clancy, 2000). Older people may internalize this and feel as if this experience label indicates they should not need guidance such as that afforded by a mentor. Furthermore, having likely been in the workforce longer than younger people, older people may make the assumption that they do not need developmental support, although perhaps in a new context developmental support may be quite beneficial. Conversely, it is more acceptable based on social norms for younger people to be inexperienced and therefore seek out developmental support. Due to these factors, we predict that younger individuals will report higher need for developmental support than will older individuals (Hypothesis 6).
METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

A mailing list with the names and campus addresses of 635 professional-level (nonfaculty) employees of a large southeastern university was obtained from the university human resources department. Surveys were mailed to all 635 employees on the list. Completed surveys were returned directly to the researchers. Reminder postcards were mailed approximately 4 weeks after the initial mailing. Seven surveys were returned as not deliverable. Five other individuals returned surveys indicating they were unable to participate for assorted reasons.

A total of 88 employees returned completed surveys. Respondents held job titles such as Program Coordinator, Director of Health Administration, and Director of Financial Services. The overall sample consisted of 58 women, 26 men, and 4 respondents who did not report their gender. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 64 years ($M = 43.5; SD = 10.6$). The majority of respondents were White/Caucasian (88.6%). Median level of education was some graduate work. Average job tenure was 3.6 years ($SD = 4.7$) and average organizational tenure was 5.5 years ($SD = 5.8$). The data from all participants were used to test Hypothesis 6, concerning the need for developmental support. Of the 88 participants, 73 reported protégé experience and thus were included in all other analyses. This sample consisted of 47 women (66%), the average age was 43.3 years ($SD = 10.7$), and the median level of education was some graduate work. The majority were White/Caucasian (93%). Average job tenure was 3.6 years ($SD = 4.8$) and average organizational tenure was 5.5 years ($SD = 5.3$). The median number of mentors the protégés reported having was 2.

Although we have no way of ascertaining the percentage of nonrespondents who did have protégé experience, it appears that the low response rate is, in part, a function of the fact that individuals who did not have any experiences in mentorships did not reply. This is not viewed as a particularly serious problem since our intent was not to make comparisons among individuals with protégé experience versus those with no experience, nor were we trying to estimate any population means. Moreover, response rates of this proportion and lower are not uncommon with this type of research (Mullen, 1998). However, because the response rate was lower than desired, we estimated the critical response rate needed to ensure generalizability of our survey results to the total sample surveyed using the procedures developed by Viswesvaran, Barrick, and Ones (1993). The Viswesvaran et al. procedure is based on the same logic used to estimate a file
drawer effect in meta-analysis (Rosenthal, 1979). In survey research, the researcher can assess the average response level of nonrespondents required to threaten conclusions inferred from the existing data. In other words, the researcher using this procedure can estimate whether central tendencies are likely to have been significantly different if a higher percentage of participants had responded. First, the average response level that would have to exist in the nonrespondent sample to threaten the conclusions inferred from the existing data is estimated. Viswasvaran et al. provided a mathematical formula for determining this value, based on the total number of individuals surveyed, the number of respondents, the number of nonrespondents, the obtained average score of survey respondents, and the average score for inferring conclusions. In this study, we used the scale anchor midpoint to represent the average score for inferring conclusions. After computing the average response level of nonrespondents, the critical response rates (CRRs) were calculated for each of the dependent variables investigated. This determined the response rate needed to be confident in generalizing conclusions to the total sample surveyed. The equation for computing the CRR can be found in Viswasvaran et al. (p. 588). Conceptually, this involves equating the average response level in the total sample to the average score for inferring conclusions. None of the estimated CRRs obtained exceeded 10%. Since the response rate of this study was 14%, we can be confident that our sample exceeded the critical level required for representativeness.

MEASURES

Mentoring experience. Participants responded yes or no to the following question:

During your career, has there been an individual who has taken a personal interest in your career; who has guided, sponsored, or otherwise had a positive and significant influence on your professional career development? In other words, have you ever been a protégé?

These definitions are consistent with those used in previous research (e.g., Allen & Poteet, 1999).

Mentorship characteristics. In cases where participants had experience in more than one mentoring relationship, they were asked to describe their current or most recent relationship. Participants indicated whether the mentoring relationship was initiated informally (defined as based on mutual attraction/spontaneously developed) or formally (defined as based on an
assignment made by someone else in the organization). The duration of the mentoring relationship was measured in years and months. Frequency of interaction was operationalized as amount of time spent together as an hourly average per month. Participants also responded yes or no concerning whether the mentor was the supervisor of the protégé. Finally, participants provided information concerning organizational-level difference between mentor and protégé (same organizational level, protégé one level below, protégé two levels below, or protégé three or more levels below).

Age. Participants indicated how old they were and how old their mentor was at the beginning of the mentorship. Participants also reported their current age.

Mentoring behaviors. Mentoring behaviors were measured with Scandura’s 15-item mentoring functions scale (Scandura, 1992; Scandura & Ragins, 1993). The reliability and factor structure of this measure have been assessed in previous research (Scandura & Ragins, 1993; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1991). Six items measure career-related functions (e.g., “My mentor placed me in important assignments”). Cronbach alpha was .74. Five items measure psychosocial functions (e.g., “I have shared personal problems with my mentor”). Cronbach alpha was .85. Four items measure role modeling (e.g., “I try to model my behavior after my mentor”). Cronbach alpha was .78. All responses were provided on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicated a greater degree of mentoring provided.

Mentorship quality. Quality of the mentoring relationship was measured with five items used by Allen (1999) (e.g., “My mentor and I enjoyed a high-quality relationship”). A 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree was used. Higher scores indicated a higher quality mentoring relationship. Cronbach alpha was .81.

Mutual learning. Five items developed by Allen (1999) were used to assess relationship-based learning (e.g., “There was reciprocal learning that took place between my mentor and me”). A 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree was used. Higher scores indicated a greater degree of learning occurred. Cronbach alpha was .79.

Need for developmental support. All participants (regardless of whether they had protégé experience) completed eight items developed for this study.
that assessed the extent the participant desired the support of a mentor (e.g., “I would like to have a mentor or coach to help me with my career”; “I believe I need to have a mentor in order to be as successful as possible on the job”). A 5-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree was used. Higher scores indicated a greater desire for mentoring. Cronbach alpha was .86.

Open-ended questions. After completing the close-ended questions for each section, participants were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions designed to solicit additional information concerning age issues in mentoring relationships. Participants were asked to indicate (a) yes or no regarding whether they had been mentored by someone very similar in age, (b) if yes, advantages to the relationship (expected advantages if no), and (c) if yes, disadvantages to the relationship (expected disadvantages if no). Participants were then asked to indicate whether they had ever been mentored by someone younger than them. This question was followed by the same set of questions described above.

RESULTS

ABSOLUTE AGE OF PROTÉGÉ

Nature of relationship. We predicted that older protégés would report receiving less role modeling (Hypothesis 1) and less career mentoring (Hypothesis 2) from their mentorships than would younger protégés. Looking first at the zero-order correlations (Table 1), we see that there is no significant relationship between protégé age and role modeling ($r = -.14, p > .05$). However, in support of Hypothesis 2, there was a significant relationship between protégé age and career mentoring ($r = -.35, p < .01$).

To control for mentorship characteristics that might be related to mentoring functions, we performed hierarchical regression analyses, where the length of relationship, hours spent per week, origin of relationship (formal or informal), and whether the mentor was an immediate supervisor were entered into the first step of a regression equation. Protégé age was entered in the second step to see whether it predicted variance in role modeling and subsequently in career mentoring beyond the variance predicted by the control variables. As shown in Table 2, the overall regression equation does not significantly predict role modeling, and protégé age does not add any significant variance to the regression equation. With regard to career mentoring, after
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role modeling</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formality</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Mentor age is the age of the mentor at the start of the mentoring relationship. Protégé age is the age of the protégé at the start of the mentoring relationship. Age difference is the protégé's age subtracted from the mentor's age. Hours per week is the approximate average number of hours per week spent with the mentor. Duration is the square root (to reduce skew) of the length of time in months the relationship lasted. Career is the average score on the career function scale. Psychosocial is the average score on the psychosocial function scale. Role modeling is the average score on the role modeling scale. Quality is the average score on the quality of relationship scale. Learning is the average score on the mutual learning scale. Level is how many levels above in the organizational hierarchy the mentor was from the protégé, where 1 = three or more above, 2 = two above, 3 = one above, and 4 = same level. Formality is whether the relationship was 1 = formal or 2 = informal. Supervisor is whether the mentor was the immediate supervisor, where 1 = yes and 2 = no.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
TABLE 2
Hierarchical Regression Results Predicting role Modeling and Career Functions From Protégé Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Modeling</th>
<th>Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beta Step 1</td>
<td>Beta Step 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formality</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protégé age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall $F$</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in $R^2$</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

accounting for the control variables, protégé age adds significant variance in Step 2 (beta = -.37, change in $R^2 = .13, p < .05$), and the overall equation is significant ($F = 4.16, p < .05$).

**Characteristics of relationship.** We questioned whether older protégés would be found more often in formal or informal relationships. Responses indicated that as the age of the protégé increased, the relationship was more likely to be initiated informally rather than formally ($r = -.28; p < .05$).

Although specific predictions were not posed concerning other mentorship characteristics, we found that protégé age was related to hierarchical level ($r = .37, p < .01$), such that older protégés tended to be closer in level to their mentor. Furthermore, protégé age was related to the duration of the relationship ($r = -.25, p < .05$) such that older protégés reported their mentorships lasting for a shorter time period.

**Mentoring outcomes.** We predicted that older protégés would report a lower overall mentorship quality than would younger protégés (Hypothesis 3). At the bivariate level, there was no relationship between protégé age and overall quality of the relationship ($r = .00, p > .05$). This hypothesis was also tested using hierarchical regression analysis. The control variables were entered in Step 1, the mentoring function variables (i.e., career, role modeling, and psychosocial) in Step 2, and then protégé age in Step 3. As shown in
TABLE 3
Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Relationship Quality From Protégé Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beta Step 1</th>
<th>Beta Step 2</th>
<th>Beta Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 (controls)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formality</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 (functions)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role modeling</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protégé age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall F</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>8.53**</td>
<td>8.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.58**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in $R^2$</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  **p < .01.

Table 3, the results point to a marginal trend for protégé age to predict variance over and above the mentoring functions (beta = .20, change in $R^2$ = .03, $p = .07$). However, the positive beta weight indicates a trend toward older protégés actually reporting a higher relationship quality than younger protégés.

The curious finding that there was no simple correlation between protégé age and quality, and yet there was a significant beta weight, might be an indicator of suppression. Tabachnick and Fidell (1989) defined a suppressor variable as one that suppresses variance irrelevant to prediction of a dependent variable (DV) due to its correlation with other independent variables (IVs). They noted that one should suspect suppression when the simple correlation between the IV and DV is much smaller than the beta weight for the IV (as in this case), and that the suppressor can be detected by in turn removing each other IV out of the equation and looking for changes in the regression coefficients for the incongruent IV. We proceeded with these instructions and found that after removing career functions from the equation, the beta weight for protégé age predicting quality drops to .16 from .20, with .16 being nonsignificant ($p > .10$). Thus, as Tabachnick and Fidell (1989) suggested, we can interpret career functions in this case as a variable that enhances the importance of protégé age by suppressing irrelevant variance.
AGE DIVERSITY

Nature of relationship. Hypothesis 4 predicted that in mentorships with greater age diversity, less psychosocial mentoring would be provided than in mentorships with less age diversity. To test this, we first created an age difference variable, such that protégé age was subtracted from mentor age. The zero-order correlation between age difference and psychosocial mentoring in the protégé sample was not significant (r = .00). However, due to problems with using difference scores in regression (Edwards, 1994), we employed an interaction approach similar to that used in previous research on age differences (Cleveland & Shore, 1992; Goldberg & Shore, 1994). This allowed us to test whether the interaction between protégé age and mentor age predicted variance in mentoring provided beyond protégé age alone. For this analysis, we entered the control variables in Step 1, the mentor and the protégé ages in Step 2, and the interaction between mentor and protégé age in Step 3. We looked for a significant change in R² at Step 3 to determine whether a significant interaction effect existed. Significant interactions were followed with simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). We performed this analysis to test Hypothesis 4 as well as for career mentoring and role modeling as exploratory analyses.

We found that the interaction between mentor age and protégé age significantly increased the prediction of psychosocial mentoring beyond their individual effects. Specifically, at Step 2 there was an R² of .33 (F = 3.93, p < .01). At this step, protégés with younger mentors on average reported more psychosocial mentoring (beta = -.29). However, at Step 3 a significant increase in R² was observed (change in R² = .09, p < .01), with significant beta weights for protégé age (.30), mentor age (-.42), and the interaction term (-.32). Simple slope follow-up analyses revealed an interesting pattern of interaction (see Figure 1). It appears that protégés of younger mentors report more psychosocial mentoring; however, that pattern becomes increasingly pronounced as the age of the protégé increased. Our prediction that mentors and protégés similar in age would have the most psychosocial mentoring was not supported.

Turning to the other mentoring functions, we found no significant differences in role modeling based on mentor-protégé age interaction. However, we did find evidence that career mentoring differed depending on the age combination of the pair. At Step 2, there was a significant R² of .32 (F = 3.76, p < .01). At this step, the age of the protégé had a significant effect on the amount of career-related mentoring (beta = -.31) such that on average younger protégés reported more career-related mentoring (as discussed previously). However, there was a significant change in R² at Step 3 (change in R² =
.09, $p < .01$), with significant beta weights for mentor age (−.34) and for the interaction (−.35), but no longer significant for protégé age (−.16). Simple slope analyses revealed the pattern of interaction depicted in Figure 2. Regardless of mentor’s age, younger protégés reported similar levels of career mentoring. On the other hand, as the age of the protégé increased, the level of career mentoring decreased as the mentors got older, with the least career mentoring provided between an older mentor and an older protégé.

Finally, we explored the possibility of curvilinear patterns as well as differences in mentoring functions in cases where the mentor was younger than the protégé. There were 8 reverse-age relationships, 14 relationships where the mentor was 0 to 5 years older than the protégé, 25 relationships where the mentor was 6 to 15 years older than the protégé, and 19 relationships where the mentor was 16 or more years older than the protégé. We split the sample into these four groups and examined mean differences in career, psychosocial, and role modeling functions using a one-way ANOVA. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4. No significant differences among the groups were detected, yet due to the small number of nontraditional cases, we may have had insufficient power in this sample to adequately test this idea.
Outcomes. We predicted that as age in mentorship pairs became more similar (i.e., less age diversity), reported relationship quality would decrease (Hypothesis 5). This hypothesis was not supported ($r = -0.06, p > .05$). Again, because of potential problems with relying solely on difference scores, we also examined the interaction between protégé age and mentor age using hierarchical regression analyses, entering controls in Step 1, functions in Step 2, age of mentor and age of protégé in Step 3, and the interaction term in Step 4. The interaction was not significant. We also examined whether mutual learning would be more likely to occur as age differences decreased between mentors and protégés. We found a nonsignificant correlation of $-0.13$. Hierarchical regression analyses again yielded nonsignificant results (complete regression results are available upon request).

As an ad hoc analysis following the above test, we investigated whether the absolute age of the protégé would be related to perceived mutual learning. Although we did not originally hypothesize this, we could envision that older protégés may report more mutual learning, as they may feel more comfortable in a mentorship if it was more of a mutual relationship. The zero-order correlation of $0.21 (p < .05)$ indicates that as protégés got older, they reported a
higher level of reported mutual learning. We also tested this using hierarchical regression analysis, as reported in Table 5. Indeed, the absolute age of the protégé added significant variance in mutual learning after accounting for the controls and the mentoring functions (beta = .42, change in $R^2 = .15, p < .05$). This yielded a marginally significant total $R^2$ of .29 ($p < .10$).

**NEED FOR DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT**

We predicted that younger individuals would report a higher need for developmental support than would older individuals. Current age of the participant was used in the analysis. In support of Hypothesis 6, the results indicated that older participants reported less need for developmental support than did younger participants ($r = -.20, p < .05$).

**CONTENT ANALYSIS**

The purpose of the content analysis was to categorize perceived and expected advantages and disadvantages of similar-age and reverse-age mentoring relationships. All responses were first transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers. Next, two coders independently reviewed all applicable comments and categorized and grouped those similar in meaning. One coder was a researcher associated with the study. The second coder was not associated with the study, but was a doctoral-level researcher with experience and training on content analysis. A criticism often leveled against qualitative methods is that the researcher’s value system, beliefs, and academic interests may unduly influence conclusions drawn from the data (Van Maanen, 1979). It was thought that by having two individuals independently responsible for the initial identification of themes and classification of comments, the
TABLE 5
Hierarchical Regression Analyses
Predicting Mutual Learning From Protégé Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beta Step 1</th>
<th>Beta Step 2</th>
<th>Beta Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 (controls)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formality</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 (functions)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role modeling</td>
<td></td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial</td>
<td></td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protégé age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall F</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in $R^2$</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01.

likelihood of undue bias influencing the direction of the analysis could be mitigated.

The unit of analysis for classification purposes was phrases. Phrases were used rather than sentences because some sentences contained two or more divergent ideas. As recommended by Weber (1990), we used a single- versus multiple-classification system such that each phrase was assigned to a single category. Rather than fit the comments into predefined categories, an inductive approach was used such that the categories emerged from the data. Once both coders had grouped all comments by common theme, the resulting “dimensions” were then provided a name to capture the meaning reflected in the group of comments (e.g., Similar Life Experiences).

The two researchers were in initial agreement concerning the categorization of 78% of the comments. In situations when the two researchers initially disagreed, they discussed the issue and came to an agreement. The nature of most disagreements was such that one coder had a set of comments grouped under one theme, whereas the second coder had those same comments split into two themes. In most cases, in the interest of parsimony, the two coders attempted to collapse dimensions with highly similar underlying themes. In cases where a dimension was represented by a single, stand-alone comment made by one participant and could not be collapsed with another dimension,
the single-comment dimension was deleted from further analyses \( N = 24 \) across all topics. Rationale for this decision was that we were more interested in comments/dimensions where multiple participants shared perceptions; hence, instances where only one subject reported a particular advantage or disadvantage were deemed less substantially meaningful.

**CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS**

Of the 73 protégés in the study, 24 (33\%) reported being mentored by someone similar in age and 6 (8\%) reported being mentored by someone younger in age. Regarding advantages to being mentored by someone similar in age, participants made a total of 38 comments, which were grouped into five dimensions. Protégés expressed the belief that similar life experiences were an advantage to similar-age mentorships (see Table 6). Other common responses were that similar-age mentorships provided good opportunities for learning and for relationship building. Regarding disadvantages to being mentored by someone similar in age, participants made a total of 27 comments, which were grouped into four dimensions (see Table 6). Disadvantages most often cited were concerns about the mentor’s knowledge and experience and relationship boundary issues.

Participants made a total of 22 comments regarding advantages to having a younger mentor, which were grouped into four dimensions. The overwhelming benefit noted concerned the expanded knowledge and learning that a younger mentor could bring to the mentorship (see Table 7). Concerning disadvantages to having a younger mentor, participants made a total of 22 comments, which were grouped into three dimensions. The major disadvantage reported was that individuals would have concerns regarding a younger mentor’s knowledge and experience (see Table 7).

**DISCUSSION**

Our investigation of the role of age in mentoring relationships was based largely on theories of age effects in organizations (e.g., Lawrence, 1987; Perry, 1997) that have suggested that a mismatch in perceptions of the age of an individual in a role could lead to problematic age effects. Some of our findings lend support to these theories. Our content analysis revealed themes commensurate with the idea of an age mismatch for both protégés and mentors. For example, participants revealed beliefs that older protégés may feel discomfort being in the subordinate position of a mentoring relationship and that younger mentors may be perceived as incompetent. Our quantitative
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Number of Comments</th>
<th>Sample Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared experiences/common background</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>“Similar experiences in life stages, history, career trajectories”; “Had similar historic background, faced similar issues related to this stage in our lives”; “Similar experiences, background, training”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for learning</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>“Learned a lot very quickly”; “Both the mentor and protégé will learn from each other”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to relate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>“Ability to relate was enhanced because of our similar age”; “Easier to connect on a personal level”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar interests and goals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>“Shared goals and dreams”; “Similar interests/goals”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to communicate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>“It may be easier for the protégé to communicate certain issues if his/her mentor is of similar age”; “None”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No advantages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantages</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about knowledge and experience</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>“Blind leading the blind if not enough knowledge”; “I am tough to impress so I might not take their help as seriously as I should”; “May not respect as much”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship boundary issues</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>“Sometimes friendship can get in the way of honesty”; “Sometimes it’s difficult to maintain a professional environment because the protégé may begin seeing the mentor as more of a peer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“She’s a little moody and became jealous with my advancement”; “Competition and insecurity could develop”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No disadvantages</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“No disadvantages in similar age”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension</td>
<td>Number of Comments</td>
<td>Sample Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded knowledge and learning</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>“New fresh ideas and lots of energy. May be an expert in a field I would know nothing about”; “Learn from different experience base”; “Someone of a different age group may have a different perspective on things and we could stand to learn from each other”; “Fresh, current appraisals of situations, trends”; “Aware of more recent professional developments and new ideas”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributes to positive atmosphere</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Good camaraderie”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater respect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“They may have respect for me because I’m older”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking opportunities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Connections to different spheres of resources and people”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about knowledge and experience</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>“Lack of depth in experience and knowledge”; “Limited history in job experience”; “Not as much experience”; “I do think that age would be a problem for me unless the person had very specialized skills”; “Difficulty developing respect, the person would have to prove him/herself and be very mature”; “Potential for feelings of discomfort or lack of trust in experience and maturity”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific skill deficiencies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Communication, motivation, closed-mind mentality—do it my way!”; “Can’t keep him on track”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealousy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Office jealousy”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
analyses pointed to mixed support for this theoretical foundation. Older protégés reported less career mentoring than younger protégés; this could be indicative of a mismatch between characteristics associated with age (e.g., less potential for development) and one part of the role of protégé (e.g., receive advice on advancement). Reports of role modeling and psychosocial mentoring did not differ by age of the protégés, however. Furthermore, our hypotheses regarding age differences between mentors and protégés were not supported. However, the findings were not entirely inconsistent with what might be predicted by matching theory. For example, more psychosocial mentoring was found in situations with younger mentors and older protégés than in situations with younger mentors with younger protégés. Perhaps when younger mentors are faced with older protégés there is pressure to compensate for expected perceptions of inexperience. Each of these findings is elaborated in more detail below. First, we discuss the findings based on the absolute age of the protégé and point to implications of these findings as well as present ideas for exploring this area in more detail. Next, we discuss our unexpected findings regarding age diversity in mentorship pairs. Throughout, we integrate our qualitative and quantitative findings to set a future research agenda.

**PROTÉGÉ AGE**

Our hypotheses that older protégés would report receiving less career mentoring than would younger protégés was supported. This replicates work by Whitely et al. (1992) and bolsters support for the generalizability of this finding. This finding is also commensurate with the literature on age stereotyping. For example, a meta-analysis by Finkelstein et al. (1995) found that younger targets were rated more highly in potential for development than older targets. In the present study, the measure of career mentoring taps into mentor behaviors such as helping the protégé get ahead in his or her career. The finding that older protégés report less of this behavior in their relationships may indicate that mentors of older protégés did not see these individuals as having potential for development or advancement. An older person in the role of protégé may appear as not being at a typical or appropriate stage of career development, which could lead to this perception of lower potential. This could be a key finding if the lack of career mentoring contributes to age discrimination in promotion decisions. Future research is needed to explore the reasons that career mentoring might be less characteristic in mentorships where the protégé is older. Furthermore, the age diversity results provide a richer picture of this finding, in that mentor age may moderate this finding. We elaborate on this further in the next section.
Career mentoring was the only mentoring function related to protégé age. However, there are some questions that our data were not able to address that should be the focus of future study. Specifically, we do not know how much each of these specific mentoring functions were desired or needed by protégés of varying ages at the outset of the mentorships. It would be interesting to examine expectations and desires of mentoring relationships at the start of new mentorships to investigate variation as a function of age. For example, it may be that older protégés do not expect or seek out career mentoring from their mentors to the same extent as younger protégés. The idea that different forms of mentoring may be more or less needed by individuals at different career and life stages is an interesting topic for future research (Kram & Hall, 1996).

Results also indicated that older protégés were more likely to be found in informal than in formal mentorships. This can be viewed as somewhat encouraging if it indicates that older workers can readily seek out and be accepted into traditional mentorships despite any theorized obstacles. However, it remains unclear whether older protégés were more likely to be in informal relationships because formal ones were not available or offered to them. Not all people have the skills necessary to seek out their own mentors, nor may they all have informal mentors available. Descriptive research examining extant formal mentoring programs is needed to determine whether certain age groups tend to be targeted as well as compare the percentage of older workers who are afforded formal mentorship opportunities compared to their younger counterparts. Access to formal mentoring programs may be especially important for older individuals who have made a major career change and are entering a new field or industry. An alternative explanation for these findings may be that older individuals are more reluctant to participate in formal mentoring programs. Our finding indicating that older participants expressed less need for developmental support than did younger participants supports this potential explanation. In making this prediction, we suggested that older people’s levels of experience as well as their label as experienced individuals would lead them to believe they needed less support, or perhaps would lead them to feel less comfort in endorsing a need for support. Of course, we cannot tell from our data whether this finding is due to an actual lower level of need in older people or a social desirability factor whereby social norms may prohibit the expression of this need in older individuals.

With regard to the outcome variables studied, mentorship quality and mutual learning, we found that the age of the protégé predicted variance beyond mentoring provided in both quality and mutual learning, such that older protégés reported higher quality and more mutual learning than did
younger protégés. The finding for overall quality was counter to our prediction, as we theorized that due to the discomfort of being in the more subordinate role of protégé, older protégés would report lower quality relationships. It may be that through their experience, older protégés are better skilled at cultivating an enriching mentorship. Alternatively, the mentorship quality measure is akin to a satisfaction measure. It is fairly well established that older people tend to report higher job satisfaction (Warr, 1994); perhaps this extends to mentorship satisfaction as well.

The finding that more mutual learning was reported by older protégés was expected. This suggests that the mentorship was more of a two-way street and that older protégés are able to utilize their own experiences to provide lessons to the mentor. This sentiment was clearly expressed in the open-ended comments concerning the advantages to similar-age and reverse-age mentorships. A major advantage noted was the opportunity for enhanced and mutual learning that could occur among reverse-age mentoring dyads. These findings also support the view of mentoring relationships within today’s turbulent work environments as described by Kram and Hall (1996), where senior employees find themselves in the role of novice and mentors are colearners within the mentorship.

AGE DIVERSITY

None of our hypotheses regarding age diversity were supported, yet we uncovered some interesting unpredicted interactions between mentor and protégé age when predicting career and psychosocial mentoring. Younger protégés, on average, tended to report a similar level of psychosocial and career-related mentoring to older protégés. However, as the age of the protégé increased, so did the disparity in the degree of mentoring provided based on the age of the mentor. With psychosocial mentoring, the amount of mentoring provided by the younger mentor increased with the age of the protégé. With career-related mentoring, the amount of mentoring provided by the older mentor decreased with the age of the protégé. Overall, it appears that protégés reported that older mentors provided the least amount of both of these types of mentoring.

We offer several explanations for these unexpected findings. It is possible that younger mentors may feel they need to work extra hard to compensate for their youthfulness and to establish their credibility as a viable mentor. Further, this need might be heightened when working with an older protégé, who may doubt a younger protégé’s mentoring capabilities. Conversely, older mentors may put forth less effort because they can rely on their experience. The finding that older mentors appear to provide the least amount of
career mentoring to older protégés may reflect a belief that older protégés might not be in need of this type of mentoring.

The finding that younger protégés reported similar mentoring experiences across the board, whereas older protégés’ experiences varied, may be due to the fact that a younger protégé is more prototypical and normative. Because a young protégé is expected, mentors may have developed shared schemas of the needs of a typical protégé. However, the needs of an older protégé, who does not fit the protégé prototype, may be less obvious, and thus we find more variance in how mentors approach this relationship. Obviously these are ad hoc speculations and must be subject to empirical scrutiny with larger numbers of mentoring pairs. An alternative suggestion, posed by an anonymous reviewer, is that it may be that older individuals are more discerning or better able to discriminate among different levels of mentoring. Although we are not aware of any research suggesting that older individuals are more perceptive than younger individuals, this might be an interesting topic to explore in future research.

The qualitative data point also to additional fruitful areas in which to expand future investigations of age diversity in mentoring. In her work concerning diversified mentoring relationships, Ragins (1997a) suggested that the development of mentoring relationships is related to identification, perceived competence, and level of interpersonal comfort among the mentorship partners. Each of these issues is reflected in the themes identified through the content analysis. The results suggest that the development of similar-age mentorships may be aided by the greater opportunity for identification and interpersonal comfort. The qualitative results underscored that a distinct advantage to similar-age mentorships was similarity in backgrounds and experiences, which would aid in the identification process and the greater ease for friendship development and interpersonal communication. It should also be noted, however, that participants mentioned that reverse-age mentorships could create situations of discomfort for an older individual seeking guidance from a junior organizational member. Reverse-age mentorships may still be relatively rare because younger individuals feel embarrassed, intimidated, or threatened by the prospect of mentoring older employees. It will be important for organizations to establish a climate of mutual trust and respect among all employees to help nontraditional mentorships flourish.

The major disadvantage noted from our analyses related to the issue of perceived competence. Participants frequently noted the difficulty that similar-aged or younger mentors might have concerning a lack of experience and skills and gaining the respect needed to effectively mentor others. Future studies may examine the extent that the issues identified in the content
analyses affect the relationship between age and mentoring outcomes. For example, problems associated with gaining respect and understanding boundary issues in the relationship may detract from the quality and effectiveness of similar-age and reverse-age mentorships. On the other hand, common background and experiences as well as ease of communicating with each other may serve as relationship enhancers. It is important to note that it is possible that a large majority of mentoring relationships are still traditional in composition not because of inhibiting forces in the environment, but because many individuals are still in traditional career stages, despite the changing nature of careers. However, as mentorships of various age compositions become more common, it will become important to examine the specific factors that help or hinder these relationships.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Particular contributions of this study include its multimethod and multiperspective approaches. For example, examining absolute age as well as age diversity is an advance in this area. Furthermore, examining qualitative responses provides a further understanding of the quantitative data and also points out avenues for future quantitative research. Of course there are some shortcomings of this investigation worth noting. First, we only report findings from the protégés’ perspective. Further explication of our findings could be made by collecting data from mentors and protégés in same-age or reverse-age dyads. Another limitation associated with the study is the low response rate. Although, as we noted, the response rate is not unusual for this type of voluntary mail-out survey, a larger sample that was evenly representative of the age spectrum would allow us to explore the issues of age diversity at different locations on that spectrum (e.g., are there differences in reverse-aged mentorships when the protégé is relatively young compared to when the protégé is relatively old?). Finally, any cross-sectional investigation of age differences is limited in that it cannot ascertain any intrapersonal differences due to the aging process, but instead compares groups of people of different ages at one point in time. We cannot disentangle effects due to age itself or to those due to cohort (i.e., generation).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future studies may want take into account the protégés’ age relative to others in the working environment (aside from the mentors’ age). Researchers have noted the importance of considering the age context of the work environment and the age type of the job when hypothesizing age effects (e.g., Cleveland, Festa, & Montgomery, 1988; Cleveland & Shore, 1992;
Finkelstein, et al., 1995). For example, in an environment where older newcomers are the norm, less face saving may be present than in a situation where older people are not typically assumed to need a mentor.

Although age-based models of adult development such as Levinson’s (1986) generally take the view that individuals pass through career stages in chronological order, in today’s dynamic career environment, it is less likely that career stages follow such an orderly pattern (Sullivan, 1999). Since age and career stage may not match, future research should attempt to operationalize career stage and disentangle possible effects of chronological age and career stage.

Moreover, future research consisting of larger samples of both men and women is needed to examine how gender influences the relationships observed in this study. Because the career paths of women tend to follow a different timetable than the career paths of men (Powell & Mainiero, 1992; Sullivan, 1999), women may be more likely to be in similar- and reverse-age mentorships than men. For example, due to family responsibilities, women may enter the workforce or resume a career at a later age. Another possibility is that because of status concerns, older men may be more reluctant than older women to enter into a mentoring relationship as a protégé or believe that they have a need for mentoring.

In sum, diversity issues concerning mentoring relationships have primarily focused on gender and race (e.g., Ragins, 1997b). This study broadens this area of inquiry by focusing on age and age diversity within mentoring relationships. This seems important given that age has recently been touted as the “new diversity issue” in the workplace (Capowski, 1994; Waldrum & Niemira, 1997). Even the small sample of this study demonstrates that mentoring of various age compositions currently exists. Researchers need to broaden their conceptualization of mentors and protégés to encompass pairs of varying age compositions. In doing so, future research is needed that focuses on pinpointing and alleviating the potential challenges of various mentorship age combinations as well as on highlighting and capitalizing on their unique strengths.

REFERENCES


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