



## Are bad experiences stronger than good ones in mentoring relationships? Evidence from the protégé and mentor perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Two studies examined the relative importance of good versus bad mentoring experiences in predicting subjective states associated with the mentoring relationship. Study 1 examined the protégé perspective and found general support for the proposition that, on average, bad is stronger than good in predicting protégé outcomes. Study 2 adopted the mentor perspective and found mixed support for the prediction that, on average, bad is stronger than good. The results are discussed in terms of advancing research and theory on the relational processes associated with mentoring in the workplace and the need to consider the relational context to more fully understand the relative predictive power of good and bad mentoring experiences.

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Workplace mentoring refers to a developmentally oriented relationship between a less experienced, junior employee (the protégé) and a more experienced, seasoned employee (the mentor) where the goal is personal and professional development of the protégé (Kram, 1985). Several decades of research document the potential benefits of mentoring for protégés (Allen, Eby, Butts, Lockwood & Simon, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng & DuBois, 2008). While less extensively examined, there is also evidence that mentors can benefit from mentoring (for a review see Allen, 2007).

Notwithstanding the positive aspects of workplace mentoring, it is important to recognize that like other types of relationships, mentors and protégés can experience difficulties in their relationship (Eby, Durley, Evans & Ragins, 2008; Eby & McManus, 2004; Eby, McManus, Simon & Russell, 2000; Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000). Although early theoretical perspectives held that mentors and protégés can have positive and negative relational experiences (Kram, 1985; Levinson, Darrow, Levinson, Klein & McKee, 1978), research to date has solely examined either the positive (good) (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990) or the negative (bad) (e.g., Eby, Durley, et al., 2008; Eby, Durley, et al., 2000) aspects of mentoring. This is problematic since mentoring relationships are likely to have both positive and negative aspects. For example, a mentor may help advance a protégé's career by recommending the protégé for important assignments or introducing the protégé to influential people within the organization (a positive relational experience). However, this same mentor may have an abrasive or intimidating interpersonal style, which the protégé finds difficult to deal with (a negative relational experience). Likewise, a protégé may be able to enhance a mentor's job performance by providing technical assistance (a positive relational experience) but be unresponsive to constructive feedback from the mentor (a negative relational experience). Moreover, when reflecting on specific aspects of a mentoring relationship, individuals should be able to make estimates of how good or bad, on average various aspects of the relationship are for them. Research on other types of close relationships finds that negative relational events consistently carry more weight than do positive relational events (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983). This mirrors the general finding that negative experiences, emotions, and cognitions tend to be more predictive of outcomes than positive ones (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001). However, these insights have not been applied to the field of mentoring.

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We use research and theory on positive–negative asymmetry effects and evolutionary psychology to pursue two main objectives. First, we directly compare the relative importance of the average amount of good versus bad mentoring experiences in predicting a range of subjective states associated with the relationship. This answers the call for mentoring scholars to examine a broader range of mentoring outcomes than those associated with instrumental gains (e.g., promotions, job attitudes, compensation) (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Kram & Ragins, 2007) and to focus more specifically on relational outcomes. Second, we examine the relative importance of the average amount of good versus bad mentoring experiences from the protégé's perspective (Study 1) and then ascertain whether a similar pattern of effects are found from the mentor's perspective (Study 2). Examining viewpoints of both mentors and protégés is important because the relative impact of good and bad mentoring experiences may vary based on one's role in the relationship.

This research effort has both theoretical and practical implications. No research to date has simultaneously considered the good and the bad in mentoring relationships and systematically compared their relative predictive strength. Doing so will not only provide a more balanced perspective on mentoring but also will significantly enhance our understanding of these influential and common work relationships. Our research will also provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of mentoring relationships and offer a solid empirical platform for the development of theory on relational processes in mentoring. Such a focus has been advocated in the positive organizational scholarship literature (e.g., Fletcher & Ragins, 2007) and in the mentoring literature (Eby, 2007; Kram & Ragins, 2007; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). On a practical level, our results may help practitioners put mentoring in its proper perspective and lead to a more balanced discussion of the potential pros and cons of mentoring relationships.

### Relational experiences associated with mentoring

Both protégés and mentors can experience good things in a mentoring relationship. Good mentoring experiences for protégés are those associated with the receipt of two distinct types of support. Career-related support consists of various, specific mentoring functions which enhance the protégé's professional development (e.g., exposure and visibility, sponsorship, and coaching). Psychosocial support consists of several specific mentoring functions which geared more toward building protégé self-efficacy, self-worth, and professional identity (e.g., friendship, acceptance and confirmation) (Kram, 1985). For protégés, good mentoring experiences predict a wide range of outcomes including psychological health and well-being, job and career attitudes, career success, and relationship satisfaction (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004; Eby, Durley, et al., 2008).

Mentors can also have good mentoring experiences (cf., Ragins & Scandura, 1999). For example, mentors report feelings of personal satisfaction from helping their protégés develop and experience generativity (Erickson, 1963), which is the belief that one is contributing to future generations. Mentors may also report enhanced job performance if protégés offer needed technical skills and may receive organizational recognition for their efforts. The relationship can also offer a loyal base of support from the protégé. Good mentoring experiences are positively associated with mentor reports of relationship quality, stronger intentions to mentor in the future, and more favorable attitudes (e.g., Allen, Poteet & Burroughs, 1997; Bozionelos, 2004; Gentry, Weber & Sadri, 2008; Eby, Durley, et al., 2008; Eby, Lockwood & Butts, 2006).

Research finds that both protégés and mentors can also report bad mentoring experiences. The most common bad experience reported by protégés is mentor–protégé mismatches (e.g., differences in values, personalities, work styles). Neglect can also occur if the mentor is perceived as not interested in helping the protégé develop. Protégés can also report lack of expertise (technical or interpersonal) or manipulative behavior (e.g., taking undue credit, sabotage) on the part of mentors. Finally, protégés report that some mentors exhibit general dysfunctionality, stemming from personal problems or negative attitudes that can negatively impact their relationship (Eby et al., 2000, 2004). Protégés' perceptions of bad experiences are correlated with a wide range of outcomes, including negative reactions to the relationship, strain reactions, and less favorable attitudes (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby et al., 2004).

Mentors can also report bad experiences with protégés (Eby, Durley, et al., 2008; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Eby & McManus, 2004). Protégé performance problems involve the protégé failing to meet the mentor's expectations or being perceived as unwilling to learn. Interpersonal problems involve conflicts, disingenuousness on the part of the protégé, and other difficulties, such as over-submissiveness. Destructive relational patterns are more intense, and involve a breach of trust, relationship exploitation, sabotage, as well as jealousy and competitiveness toward the mentor. Mentor reports of bad experiences with protégés are related to less favorable work attitudes, strain reactions and reduced relationship quality (Eby, Durley, et al., 2008).

An important point about good and bad mentoring experiences is that they are both conceptually and empirically distinct (Eby, Durley, Evans & Ragins, 2006; Eby et al., 2004). In other words, the absence of good mentoring does not necessarily mean that bad mentoring has occurred, and vice versa. To illustrate, a protégé that reports that his or her mentor does not provide much coaching, sponsorship, or opportunities for visibility within the organization (all good career-related support experiences) is not necessarily indicating that the mentor lacks expertise, is manipulative, or neglectful (all bad types of mentoring experiences). However, an important caveat in our research is that we are examining overall perceptions of the average amount of good and bad mentoring experiences. Therefore, we cannot make conclusive statements about the relative "goodness" or "badness" of particular relational experiences. We also are not able to examine non-linear change; for example, how a particularly positive (or negative) experience may alter subjective and affective reactions to the relationship.

## Why would bad be stronger than good in mentoring relationships?

The positive–negative asymmetry effect holds that negative stimuli have a stronger impact than positive stimuli in human cognition (Peeters, 1971), and existing research has consistently supported this effect. Negative stimuli are processed more systematically and contribute more to one's overall impression than positive stimuli (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). Related research on human decision-making also supports this effect. Specifically, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) prospect theory of decision-making holds that greater weight is given to costs than gains when rendering judgments, which may reflect the adaptive importance of responding to negative stimuli in one's environment (Pratto & John, 1991; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). For example, threatening events require immediate action and behavior change for self-protection whereas positive, non-threatening events do not require behavior change. Additional support for the positive–negative asymmetry effect comes from research on impression formation (e.g., Skowronski & Carlston, 1987), recognition memory (e.g., Ohira, Winton & Oyama, 1998), and physiological arousal to stimuli (e.g., Taylor, 1991).

The positive–negative symmetry effect is aligned with foundational tenets of evolutionary psychology. Specifically, the tendency to focus on bad rather than good, and to respond more strongly to bad experiences, lies in the adaptive survival value of responding to negative events (Baumeister et al., 2001; Cannon, 1932; LeDoux, 1996). Existing research has found that bad experiences trigger more immediate, intense reactions and negative information requires less conscious information processing than positive information (e.g., Ito, Larsen, Smith & Cacioppo, 1998; Pratto & John, 1991). Attention to bad experiences allows individuals to develop strategies that help them avoid future negative events (Baumeister et al., 2001). This self-regulatory behavior has survival value by helping individuals meet environmental demands that may be perceived as psychologically, cognitively, or physically threatening.

Applying some of these ideas to organizations, LaBianca and Brass (2006) propose that negative organizational relationships can have greater predictive power in understanding individual outcomes than positive relationships. They offer numerous explanations for this prediction, including the relative rarity of negative relationships (which heightens their saliency), the greater adaptive value of responding to negative events due to their inherent threat, and lesser ambiguity associated with negative information which allows for faster social judgments and interpretation. We extend LaBianca and Brass (2006) theorizing on social networks by focusing on the bad and good associated with a specific mentor–protégé relationship.

## Mentor and protégé outcomes associated with relational experiences

Historically the mentoring literature has linked mentoring to instrumental, career-related protégé outcomes such as compensation, promotion, perceived career success and work attitudes (e.g., Allen et al., 2004). Similar types of instrumental outcomes have been examined as outcomes of mentoring for the mentor (e.g., Allen, Lentz & Day, 2006; Eby, Durley, et al., 2006). While this research has made important contributions to the literature, a paradigm shift is occurring in the field of mentoring. Building on the positive organizational scholarship movement (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003), there is a call for researchers to extend the range of mentoring outcomes examined to include subjective states and affective reactions to the relationship. This includes the examination of overall relational quality, motivational intentions related to the relationship, and psychological and physiological indicators of well-being. The importance of expanding the range of outcomes examined in relation to mentoring is underscored by recalling that mentoring relationships are developmental and relational in nature; they are not simply tickets to advancement in organizational settings.

Answering this call for research, we focus on various subjective states and affective reactions to the mentoring relationship. This includes general affective reactions (i.e., overall relationship quality), motivational indicators of relationship quality (i.e., intentions to stay in the relationship, willingness to mentor in the future), and psychological and physiological indicators of well-being (i.e., psychological withdrawal from work, depressed mood at work, burnout). We also realize that given the different roles that mentor and protégé play in the mentoring relationship, some outcomes may be more or less relevant for mentors and protégés, respectively. This issue is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

### Study 1: The protégé perspective

Study 1 focuses on the relative importance of the average amount of good versus bad mentoring experiences on protégé outcomes. We know that both good (e.g., coworker and supervisor support; Viswesvaran, Sanchez & Fisher, 1999) and bad (e.g., abusive supervision; Tepper, 2000; negative mentoring experiences; Eby et al., 2004) relational experiences at work are associated with a wide range of protégé attitudinal, psychological, and behavioral outcomes. However, what remains unknown is the relative predictive power of good and bad mentoring experiences on subjective states and affective reactions to the mentoring relationship.

For protégés the average amount of good and bad experiences are likely to influence overall perceptions of relational quality, intentions to stay in the mentoring relationship, and indicators of psychological and physiological well-being. A well-established body of social–psychological research on close relationships links both positive and negative relational experiences to perceived quality of the relationship and intentions to stay in the relationship. For example, one of the most strongly supported theories of close relationships, Rusbult (1980) investment model, finds that relationship satisfaction is a direct function of the costs (i.e., bad experiences) and benefits (i.e., good experiences) associated with that relationship. Other research consistently finds that intent to remain in a relationship is predicted by specific positive and negative relational events (Huston & Burgess, 1979; Levinger, 1979).

Similar claims have been made in the mentoring literature (Eby, 2007) but not examined empirically. Research also convincingly demonstrates that relationships and social interactions influence physiological and psychological reactions (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Seeman, 2001). In fact, Heaphy (2007) argues that bodily cues are important indicators of relationship quality since people report feelings as a result of, or in reaction to, social encounters (Lennie, 2000). Since mentoring relationships occur in organizational settings, we examined two protégé indicators of psychological and physical well-being which are associated with the work environment: psychological withdrawal from work and depressed mood at work.

In terms of making predictions regarding the relative importance of good versus bad mentoring experiences, it is important to note that the objective of a mentoring relationship is the personal and professional development of the protégé (Kram, 1985). When an individual enters into a mentoring relationship as a protégé, he or she is put in a vulnerable position relative to the mentor. The protégé relies upon the mentor to be a guide, confidant, and source of support during a time of personal and professional transition (Levinson et al., 1978). Given the vulnerability of protégés and consistent with the literature just reviewed, we expect that bad relational experiences will carry more weight than will positive experiences in predicting protégé outcomes. This leads to the following predictions:

**Hypothesis 1.** For protégés, bad mentoring experiences will be more important than good experiences in predicting overall relationship quality and intentions to stay in the mentoring relationship.

**Hypothesis 2.** For protégés, bad mentoring experiences will be more important than good experiences in predicting psychological withdrawal at work and depressed mood at work.

### Study 1 method

*Participants and procedure.* Data were collected from alumni of a large Southeastern university who graduated in 1995. A cover letter, consent form, survey, and self-addressed postage-paid return envelope were mailed to 2250 alumni. Following Dillman (2000) suggestion we sent both a pre-notification postcard and a follow-up postcard to all alumni. Four hundred and sixty-six completed surveys were returned and an additional 201 surveys were returned as undeliverable. The survey was only applicable to those with experience as a protégé, and since we could not target these individuals in advance, our response rate of 23% is a conservative estimate.

We identified individuals with experience as a protégé by asking the following question, “One type of work relationship is a mentoring relationship. A mentor is generally defined as a higher-ranking, influential individual in your work environment who had advanced experience and knowledge and is committed to providing upward mobility support in your career. A mentor may or may not be in your organization, and s/he may or may not be your immediate supervisor. Have you ever had a mentor?” (adapted from Ragins & Cotton (1999)). Two hundred and thirty-eight respondents had experience as a protégé and were used in subsequent analyses, with the exception of intentions to leave the relationship which was only applicable to those currently in a mentoring relationship ( $n = 153$ ).

On average protégés were 30.8 years old ( $SD = 5.4$ ), female (56%), and Caucasian (97%). Most participants held a Bachelors degree (67%), with the remainder reporting a Masters (26%) or Doctorate (or equivalent) (7%). Protégés were in a wide range of jobs (e.g., managerial, administrative, sales) and were employed in a variety of industries (e.g., service, retail trade, manufacturing). Most protégés reported on on-going mentoring relationships (63%) that were not formally arranged by the organization (71%). The average length of the mentoring relationship was just over 2 years ( $M = 25.2$  months,  $SD = 21.6$  months). On average, protégés reported that their mentors were older ( $M = 43.6$ ) and over half of the mentors were men (59%).

*Measures.* Because both current and former protégés completed surveys, we instructed protégés to “answer the following questions thinking about your current or most recent mentoring relationship.” Good experiences in mentoring were measured using Ragins and McFarlin (1990) measure. This measure includes 10 subscales representing specific mentoring functions, 5 of which represent career-related support and 5 of which represent psychosocial support. Because our interest was comparing the relative importance of overall good versus overall bad protégé experiences, we created a composite index of good mentoring by averaging all 30 items from Ragins and McFarlin (1990) measure. The coefficient alpha for the composite is .94. A sample item representing career-related support is, “My mentor provides me with challenging assignments.” A sample item representing psychosocial support is, “My mentor provides support and encouragement.”

Bad experiences in mentoring were measured using Eby et al. (2004) measure. This measure consists of 5 subscales representing different bad mentoring experiences (mismatches, neglect, manipulative behavior, mismatches, general dysfunctionality). Sample items comprising this measure include, “The personal values of my mentor are different from my own,” “My mentor is reluctant to talk about things that are important to me,” and “My mentor takes credit for my hard work.” As with the good mentoring measure, we created a bad mentoring composite by averaging all 42 items. Coefficient alpha for this composite measure was .96.

Overall relationship quality was measured using Allen and Eby (2003) 3-item scale (e.g., “My mentor and I enjoy a high quality relationship,”  $\alpha = .83$ ). Intentions to stay in the relationship were measured with a modified 3-item version of Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh's (1979) measure of intentions to leave the organization (e.g., “I intend to exit this mentoring relationship in the near future,” reverse scored,  $\alpha = .87$ ). Depressed mood at work was measured using Quinn and Sheppard (1974) 5-item scale (e.g.,

"I often feel downhearted or blue,"  $\alpha = .73$ ). Psychological withdrawal at work was measured with six items Lehman and Simpson (1992) scale (e.g., "I think of being absent,"  $\alpha = .78$ ).

**Control variables.** To provide a strong test of the study hypotheses we examined the relative importance of bad versus good over and above variables that may relate the protégé outcomes examined. Protégé sex, age, organization tenure, education, job type and department were considered as control variables. Whether the mentoring relationship was currently on-going and the type of mentorship (formal or informal) were also examined as possible controls. To preserve power we selected control variables that were significantly related to the outcomes and did not display high intercorrelations (Neter & Wasserman, 1990). Based on these criteria, current mentoring relationship (coded 0 = not current, 1 = current), type of relationship (coded 1 = formal, 2 = informal), and salary were used as control variables.

### Study 1 results and discussion

Means, standard deviations and correlations among protégé variables are shown in Table 1. As expected, good mentoring experience were positively related to intentions to stay in the relationship and overall relationship quality, and negatively related to depressed mood at work. The correlation between good mentoring and psychological withdrawal at work was not significant. Also as expected, bad mentoring was negatively related to intentions to stay in the relationship and overall relationship quality, and positively related to depressed mood at work and psychological withdrawal at work.

To appropriately compare the strength of good versus bad, relative weights analysis (RWA) was used (Johnson, 2000). This statistical technique overcomes the inherent limitations of typical approaches used to examine relative importance such as hierarchical regression (see Johnson & LeBreton, 2004). With RWA the initial set of predictors are first transformed into a new set of predictors that are as similar as possible to the original predictors yet orthogonal to one another (see Gibson, 1962). Next, the criterion is regressed on to these transformed predictors. The information on the relationship between the new variables and the criterion is integrated with information on the relationship between the original predictors and the new predictors. This yields a relative weight for each predictor that represents its relative contribution to prediction of the criterion variable (for a detailed discussion see Johnson (2000)). To account for variation associated with the control variables, we used residualized variables in the RWA.

To test whether the percent of variance explained was significantly different across good and bad experiences, confidence intervals were computed using a bootstrap approach to estimate standard errors (Johnson, 2004). Specifically, relative weights were calculated across 500 random subsamples (taken with replacement), using the standard deviation of differences between good and bad mentoring experiences to represent the standard errors. Then, we constructed 95% confidence intervals by taking the upper and lower  $\alpha/2$  percentiles from the empirical distribution of those differences. The exclusion of zero from the confidence intervals indicates a statistically significant difference between good and bad experiences (Johnson, 2004).

Four separate RWAs were conducted, one for each dependent variable. Hypothesis 1 focused on affective reactions to the relationship and was partially supported (see Table 2). The overall amount of variance accounted for was 42% for intentions to stay in the relationship and 54% for overall relationship quality. As predicted, overall bad mentoring experiences accounted for 79.9% of the variance accounted for in intentions to stay in the mentoring relationship compared to the remaining 20.1% associated with overall good experiences. The confidence interval for intentions to stay does not include zero, indicating a statistically significant difference between bad and good. Counter to prediction, overall good mentoring experiences accounted for 74.1% of the explained variance in overall relationship quality, with the remaining 25.9% of the explained variance associated with overall bad mentoring experiences. Moreover, the confidence interval indicates that the difference between good and bad is statistically significant for relationship quality, although the effect is opposite prediction.

Hypothesis 2 was fully supported. As shown in Table 2, protégé reports of overall good and overall bad mentoring experiences explained 7% of the variance in psychological withdrawal at work and 9% of the variance in depressed mood at work. Moreover,

**Table 1**  
Correlations among Study 1 variables: protégé perspective.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Current relationship									
2. Type of relationship	.15								
3. Salary	.01	.03							
4. Good mentoring	.21	.32	.06						
5. Bad mentoring	-.25	-.11	.05	-.59*					
6. Psych. withdrawal	.01	.10	.02	-.05	.24*				
7. Depressed mood	-.01	-.08	.00	-.17*	.30*	.54*			
8. Intentions to stay in rel.	.05	.08	-.13	.44*	-.66*	-.20*	-.37*		
9. Relationship quality	.25*	.26*	.06	.80*	-.56*	-.11	.17*	.40*	
Mean	.63	1.71	67272	3.66	1.99	2.18	2.20	1.55	4.02
SD	.49	.45	74651	.54	.55	.67	.70	.67	.68

Note. Correlations with intent to leave relationship based on  $N = 153$  (only those currently in a mentoring relationship). Current coded 0 = not current, 1 = current. Type of relationship coded 1 = formal, 2 = informal.

\* $p < .05$ .

**Table 2**

Relative weights analysis results for Study 1: protégé outcomes.

DV = relationship quality				DV = intentions to stay in the relationship			
Total $R^2 = .54$ . $F(7,227) = 136.34$ , $p < .01$ .				Total $R^2 = .42$ . $F(2,148) = 54.07$ , $p < .01$ .			
Predictor	Relative weight percentage			Predictor	Relative weight percentage		
Overall good mentoring	74.1%			Overall good mentoring	20.1%		
Overall bad mentoring	25.9%			Overall bad mentoring	79.9%		
	Difference	95% CI low	95% CI high		Difference	95% CI low	95% CI high
Good vs. Bad	48.2*	32.57	66.57	Good vs. Bad	-59.80*	-.79.23	-.32.77
DV = psychological withdrawal at work				DV = depressed mood at work			
Total $R^2 = .07$ . $F(2,232) = 8.17$ , $p < .01$ .				Total $R^2 = .09$ . $F(2,233) = 10.92$ , $p < .01$ .			
Predictor	Relative weight percentage			Predictor	Relative weight percentage		
Overall good mentoring	9.7%			Overall good mentoring	12.0%		
Overall bad mentoring	90.3%			Overall bad mentoring	88.0%		
	Difference	95% CI low	95% CI high		Difference	95% CI Low	95% CI high
Good vs. bad	-80.6*	-85.13	-18.13	Good vs. bad	-76.0*	-85.99	-8.56

Note. Relative weight percentage refers to the percent of total variance accounted for by all predictors controlling for current relationship, type of relationship, and salary. 95% CI refers to lower and upper  $\alpha/2$  percentiles of the sampling distribution. Percentages may not 100% due to rounding.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

overall bad mentoring experiences accounted for 90.3% of the explained variance in psychological withdrawal and 88.0% of the explained variance in depressed mood at work. The remaining variance (9.7% and 12.0%, respectively) was accounted for by overall good mentoring experiences. The confidence intervals for the difference between bad versus good mentoring predictors do not include zero for either psychological withdrawal or depressed mood, indicating a statistically significant difference between good and bad experiences. This supports the prediction that bad outweighs good for these two protégé outcomes.

Study 1 found that bad mentoring experiences are stronger than good ones in predicting protégé intentions to stay in the mentoring relationship, psychological withdrawal at work, and depressed mood at work. These findings are consistent with research evidence suggesting events that are negatively valenced have a greater impact on individuals than positively valenced events of the same type (see Baumeister et al., 2001). For instance, bad experiences have a more sustained effect, and are more intensely experienced than good events (Brickman, Coates & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Interestingly, and counter to prediction, overall good mentoring experiences actually had more predictive power than did overall bad experiences in predicting overall perceptions that the relationship was of high quality. One explanation is that for protégés the absence of negative experiences does not make a mentoring relationship high quality. Rather, for perceptions of relationship quality to be high, positive relational experiences are required. Another explanation is affect congruency whereby affective states facilitate the processing of affectively congruent information and inhibit the processing of affectively incongruent information (see Rosenberg, 1998). This would explain why bad mentoring demonstrated greater predictive power for depressed mood and psychological withdrawal from work (both negative affective states), whereas good mentoring was more predictive of relationship quality (a positive affective state).

### Study 2: The Mentor Perspective

A key question that emerges from Study 1 is whether a similar pattern of effects exists for mentors. On one hand, Baumeister et al. (2001) argues convincingly and reviews considerable empirical evidence to support the “bad is stronger than good” phenomenon. On the other hand, LaBianca and Brass (2006) discuss the importance of status dissimilarity in predicting the relative predictive power of good versus bad relational experiences at work. Mentoring relationships are marked by substantial power differences. Because of their greater relative status and power, mentors are in a position to do considerable damage to protégés, both personally and professionally. For example, a disgruntled mentor could easily sabotage a protégé’s career by dropping a few hints to other senior managers that the protégé does not work well under stress, has serious personality flaws, is distrustful, etc. Mentors can also misuse their power and authority over protégés by inappropriately delegating tasks, berating protégés, and taking credit for protégés’ hard work (Eby et al., 2000). In contrast, although bad experiences with protégés may be unpleasant and cause some distress for mentors, the net effect of bad experiences may not be as great since protégés do not control resources or rewards that are valued by mentors (e.g., work assignments, pay, and promotions).

There are also different role expectations for mentors and protégés. Protégés are expected to be deferential, eager learners whereas mentors are expected to impart knowledge and help the protégé develop personally and professionally (Kram, 1985). These role differences are reflected in the unique types of bad mentoring experiences reported by mentors and protégés. Specifically, the bad mentoring experiences reported by mentors tend to be less destructive and damaging than those reported by protégés (compare Eby et al. (2000) to Eby & McManus (2004)).

Notwithstanding these power and role-related differences, the literature on positive–negative asymmetry and evolutionary psychology support the idea that bad will be stronger than good. So, consistent with Study 1, we predict that bad will be stronger than good in predicting mentor outcomes. In Study 2 we examine mentor perceptions of overall relationship quality and intentions to stay in the mentoring relationship since good and bad relational experiences are consistent predictors of these outcomes. We also examine the motivational construct of mentors' willingness to enter into another mentoring relationship in the future. Previous research finds that willingness to mentor is related to the expected costs and benefits of mentoring (Ragins & Scandura, 1999) as well as the type of relational experiences one reports in existing mentoring relationships (Eby, Durley, et al., 2006). It is a particularly important relationship outcome from the mentor's perspective since mentoring relationships are not possible unless individuals are willing to step up and assume the role of mentor.

In terms of well-being, mentor burnout is examined. The rationale for this is that mentors provide support, encouragement, advice, and assistance to protégés (Kram, 1985). In situations where such efforts are not appreciated or there are unpleasant relational exchanges, the literature suggests that burnout may result (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996). This is supported by research on the experience of burnout in response to unreciprocated help toward others (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Schaufeli, 2006). Conversely, positive relational exchanges should help alleviate mentor burnout, based on the positive and stress buffering effects of positive interpersonal exchanges and social support (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). This leads us to predict:

**Hypothesis 1.** For mentors, bad mentoring experiences will be more important than good experiences in predicting overall perceptions of relationship quality, intentions to stay in the mentorship, and willingness to mentor in the future.

**Hypothesis 2.** For mentors, bad mentoring experiences will be more important than good experiences in predicting burnout.

### Study 2 method

*Participants and procedure.* Data were collected by a survey that was sent to a total of 2501 non-faculty employees of two large state universities, one in the Southeast ( $n = 1552$ ) and one in the Midwest ( $n = 949$ ). Eligible employees were in exempt positions with professional titles (e.g., director, manager). Employees were excluded from the study if they were classified in teaching or research positions (e.g., instructor, assistant professor) since student–faculty mentoring and advisee–advisor relationships are different from typical organizational mentoring relationships. Study materials were sent by campus mail and each contained a cover letter, consent form, survey, and return envelope. Following Dillman (2000) recommendation, employees were contacted multiple times before and after receiving the study materials. Individuals were instructed to return a completed survey if they were mentors, but to either discard or return the survey if they were not mentors. Six hundred and fifty-nine individuals returned completed and unanswered surveys for a response rate of 26%. However, this is a conservative estimate because it is not possible to estimate the number of individuals who received the study materials, were ineligible, and opted to simply discard the survey because they did not have experience as a mentor.

To identify mentors we asked the following question, “One type of work relationship is a mentoring relationship. A mentor is generally defined as a higher-ranking, influential individual in your work environment who has advanced experience and knowledge and is committed to providing upward mobility and support in the protégé's career. A protégé may or may not be in the mentor's department or unit, and s/he may not be your immediate subordinate. Have you ever had a protégé?” (adapted from Ragins & Cotton (1999)). Two hundred and forty two individuals had experience as a mentor and were used in the subsequent analyses, with the exception of intentions to leave the relationship which was only applicable to those currently in a mentoring relationship ( $N = 135$ ). Mentors were almost all Caucasian (97%) who were working in a wide range of jobs (e.g., librarian, academic professional, director). The average age was 45.6 ( $SD = 10.23$ ) and 64% were women. Most mentors (59%) reported on current mentoring relationships that were not formally assigned (73%). The average length of the mentoring relationships was around 2 years ( $M = 25.12$  months,  $SD = 30.62$  months) and 76% of the mentors reported having a female protégé.

*Measures.* Because both current and former mentors completed surveys, we instructed mentors “thinking about your current protégé, or most recent protégé, please answer the following questions.” Mentors' reports of good experiences were assessed using Ragins and Scandura (1999) 21-item multidimensional scale. This measure includes 5 subscales that assess personal satisfaction, generativity, enhanced job performance, organizational recognition, and loyal base of support. Minor modifications were made to the items so that mentors responded to the questions thinking about a specific relationship rather than the benefits they anticipated from a mentoring relationship in general. For example, the original item “Mentoring makes one feel better about oneself” was changed to “Mentoring my protégé makes me feel better about myself.” Other sample items on this measure include, “I obtain position recognition from my department/unit for mentoring this protégé” and “I get a sense of fulfillment by passing on my wisdom to my protégé.” Because our interest was in comparing overall good and overall bad mentoring experiences, a composite measure was created to represent mentor reports of good mentoring. Coefficient alpha for this composite measure was .91.

Mentor's reports of bad experiences in the mentoring relationship were measured using Eby, Durley, et al., (2008) multidimensional measure. This measure includes 36 items that assess the following: protégé performance problems, interpersonal problems, and destructive relational patterns. Sample items on this measure include, “My protégé has performance problems on the job” and “My protégé tries to damage my reputation at work.” All items were averaged to create a composite measure, with a resultant coefficient alpha of .97.

In term of outcomes, burnout was measured with Maslach et al. (1996) 5-item measure of emotional exhaustion (e.g., “I feel used up at the end of the day,”  $\alpha = .89$ ). Overall relationship quality ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and intentions to stay in the relationship ( $\alpha = .84$ ) were assessed with the same measures used in Study 1 (the referent for the relationship quality items were modified to refer to the protégé rather than the mentor). Willingness to mentor in the future was measured with Ragins and Scandura (1999) 4-item measure. The items were modified slightly to reflect the desire to mentor again in the future (original item “I intend to be a mentor in the future” was changed to “I intend to be a mentor again,”  $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Control variables.** As with Study 1, the relative importance of bad versus good was examined over and above variables that may relate to the mentor outcomes examined. The same potential control variables were considered in for inclusion in Study 2: mentor sex, age, organization tenure, education, job type, department, whether the mentoring relationship was currently on-going, and the type of mentorship (formal or informal). In addition, since data were collected at two different universities a dummy code representing the data source was also considered as a control variable. To preserve power we used control variables that were significantly related to the criteria and did not display high intercorrelations (Neter & Wasserman, 1990). Based on these criteria, current mentoring relationship (coded 0 = not current, 1 = current) and salary were included as control variables.

### Study 2 Results and discussion

Correlations among study variables are shown in Table 3. As expected, good mentoring experiences with protégés were generally associated with higher overall relationship quality, greater willingness to mentor in the future, and stronger intentions to stay in the relationship. Good mentoring was not significantly related to burnout. Consistent with our predictions we also found that bad mentoring experiences with protégés were significantly associated with greater burnout, lower relationship quality, weaker intentions to stay in the relationship, and less willingness to mentor others in the future.

The total variance accounted for with all predictors was 32% for overall relationship quality, 25% for intentions to stay in the relationship, 19% for willingness to mentor, and 4% for burnout (see Table 4). Similar to Study 1, hypotheses were tested using RWA (Johnson, 2000) and residualized variables were used to remove covariation associated with the control variables before computing relative weights. Confidence intervals were computed using the bootstrapping procedures described in Study 1. Four RWAs were conducted, one for each dependent variable.

Hypothesis 1 was partially supported (see Table 4). Overall bad experiences with protégés contributed more to the prediction of overall relationship quality than did overall good experiences (65.0% bad, 35.0% good). A similar pattern was found for intentions to stay in the relationship (77.8% bad, 22.2% good). For both of these mentor outcomes, the confidence interval did not include zero, indicating that these differences were statistically significant (see Table 4). Counter to prediction, overall good protégé experiences (60.9%) were significantly stronger than overall bad experiences (39.1%) in predicting willingness to mentor in the future. However, the confidence interval includes zero, indicating that there is no significant difference in the relative importance of bad versus good in terms of predicting willingness to mentor. Hypothesis 2 was not supported. The trend was in the expected direction such that overall bad experiences explained more variance in prediction of mentor burnout than did overall good experiences (86.2% and 13.8% of the explained variance, respectively). However, the confidence interval associated with burnout included zero, indicating no significant difference between bad and good experiences.

Study 2 revealed that the impact of overall bad and overall good experiences on mentoring outcomes varied to some extent by the role in the relationship. Similar to the results for protégés, bad outweighed good in terms of intentions to stay in the relationship. However, in contrast to the findings for protégés yet consistent with prediction, perceptions of relationship quality were more influenced by the bad things that occur in the relationship for mentors than the good things. In addition, the relative predictive power of good and bad experiences with protégés was similar for willingness to mentor in the future and mentor burnout. It may be that experienced mentors realize the challenges inherent in the role, and as a consequence bad and good experiences do not differ significantly in predicting future willingness to mentor. Consistent with this idea, Ragins and Scandura

**Table 3**

Correlations among Study 2 variables: mentor perspective.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Current relationship								
2. Salary	-.02							
3. Good mentoring	.19	.17						
4. Bad mentoring	-.20	-.17	-.45*					
5. Burnout	.04	.05	-.09	.18*				
6. Relationship quality	.05	.11	.44*	-.54*	-.16 <sup>†</sup>			
7. Intentions to stay in rel.	-.09	.18*	.37*	-.53*	-.06	.46*		
8. Willingness to mentor	.15 <sup>†</sup>	.15 <sup>†</sup>	.43*	-.38*	-.04	.27 <sup>†</sup>	.38*	
Mean	.59	58209	3.35	1.58	2.24	3.99	1.70	4.04
SD	.49	29327	.50	.55	1.30	.62	.73	.73

Note. Correlations with intent to leave relationship based on  $N = 135$  (only those currently in a mentoring relationship). Current coded 0 = not current, 1 = current. Type of relationship coded 0 = formal, 1 = informal. Current relationship coded 0 = no, 1 = yes.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .05$ .

**Table 4**

Relative weights analysis results for Study 2: mentor outcomes.

DV = relationship quality				DV = intentions to stay in the relationship			
Total $R^2 = .32$ . $F(2,212) = 48.74$ , $p < .01$ .				Total $R^2 = .25$ . $F(2,132) = 22.08$ , $p < .01$ .			
Predictor	Relative weight percentage			Predictor	Relative weight percentage		
Overall good mentoring	35.0%			Overall good mentoring	22.2%		
Overall bad mentoring	65.0%			Overall bad mentoring	77.8%		
	Difference	95% CI low	95% CI high		Difference	95% CI low	95% CI high
Good vs. bad	-30.0*	-62.05	-2.83	Good vs. bad	-55.6*	-88.86	-11.93
DV = willingness to mentor				DV = burnout			
Total $R^2 = .19$ . $F(2,210) = 24.10$ , $p < .01$ .				Total $R^2 = .04$ . $F(2,211) = 4.03$ , $p < .05$ .			
Predictor	Relative weight percentage			Predictor	Relative weight percentage		
Overall Good Mentoring	60.9%			Overall good mentoring	13.8%		
Overall Bad Mentoring	39.1%			Overall bad mentoring	86.2%		
	Difference	95% CI low	95% CI high		Difference	95% CI low	95% CI high
Good vs. Bad	21.8	-32.51	69.76	Good vs. Bad	-72.4	-91.80	48.88

Note. Relative weight percentage refers to the percent of total variance accounted for by all predictors controlling for current relationship and salary. 95% CI refers to lower and upper  $\alpha/2$  percentiles of the sampling distribution. Percentages may not 100% due to rounding.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

(1999) found that those with experience in a mentoring relationship had a more balanced and realistic perspective on the potential costs and benefits of serving as a mentor to others.

In summary, Study 2 challenges Baumeister et al. (2001) claim regarding the universality of the “bad is stronger than good” effect by illustrating that this may not be the case for some types of work relationships and some types of outcomes. Explanations for the different pattern of findings across Study 1 and Study 2 are discussed below.

## General discussion

Four overall conclusions can be reached from Study 1 and Study 2. First, bad is generally stronger than good in terms of predicting protégé outcomes. Second, the evidence is mixed in terms of bad being stronger than good in predicting mentor outcomes. Third, a differential pattern of effects for bad versus good exists in predicting relationship quality for protégés and mentors. Fourth, the relative predictive power of good and bad for well-being varies for mentors and protégés. Taken together these studies illustrate the importance of examining both good and bad mentoring experiences, and doing so from both the protégé and the mentor perspective.

### Comparing the predictive power of bad versus good for protégés and mentors

For both protégés and mentors bad experiences outweighed good ones in predicting intent to stay in the relationship. This is consistent with Baumeister et al. (2001) theorizing that bad experiences carry more weight in predicting relationship stability than do comparable good experiences. In fact, Gottman's research on romantic relationships finds that good interactions must outnumber bad ones by a ratio of at least five to one for a relationship to stay intact. If the ratio of good to bad experiences falls below this level, then the relationship is likely to break-up (Gottman, 1994). It may also be that simply having a weak bond with one's partner is not sufficient to initiate a break-up since there are costs associated with leaving (Huston & Burgess, 1979). These costs can be amplified in situations where alternative relational partners are limited, a power difference exists between individuals, or the relationship is highly public (Levinger, 1979), as are the case with many workplace mentoring relationships.

Differences were found across the two samples in terms of both perceptions of relationship quality and well-being. For protégés, overall good outweighed overall bad in terms of predicting relationship quality, yet the opposite effect existed for mentors (i.e., bad > good). This may reflect the asymmetrical nature of mentoring relationships. Although the mentor may benefit from the relationship, the primary goal is protégé growth and development (Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2007; Kram, 1985). As such, protégés may reap additional higher-order positive benefits when in a high quality mentoring relationship, such as enhanced career self-efficacy and career success. This is less likely to be the case for mentors. The relative salience of bad mentoring experiences in predicting mentors' perceptions of relationship quality may reflect sensitivity to the investment of time and energy in a relationship if their efforts are not appreciated or attempts to foster protégé grow and develop seem futile. In other words, for mentors the quality of the relationship may be judged more in terms of whether their own efforts to help the protégé are thwarted by relational problems.

For protégés, bad was significantly more predictive than good in predicting well-being, whereas no significant difference was found for mentors. One explanation is that protégés are particularly vulnerable in a mentoring relationship. As such, bad experiences

may be more damaging to a protégé's self-esteem and create concerns regarding how bad experiences with a mentor will influence day-to-day work experiences or even hinder future career prospects (Scandura, 1998). This may induce psychological strain in a protégé in the form of depressed mood or psychological withdrawal. While mentors may be affected by the stress associated with bad experiences with a protégé, the potential threat is far less for mentors since protégés do not control valued resources for mentors and mentors can easily distance themselves from protégés by simply reducing their engagement in the relationship.

Overall, our findings suggests that the relative balance of good and bad experiences in relationships needs to be assessed not in a vacuum, but in the context of the relationship itself. The impact of a relationship appears to depend on one's role, and mentoring scholars have long recognized that the costs and benefits associated with being a mentor differ from that of the protégé. This helps explain why the relative weight of good and bad relational experiences differ for protégés and mentors.

### *Implications for practice*

There are several practical suggestions based on our findings. It seems important to inform potential mentors and protégés of the full range of relational experiences they might encounter in a mentoring relationship. Such educative efforts are important since the popular press tends to present mentoring as an essential ingredient for protégé development, yet we know that often mentors and protégés have unmet expectations in mentoring relationships (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Young & Perrewé, 2000a;2000b). In addition, given the potency of bad mentoring experiences for protégés, mentoring may be best suited for organizational contexts where there is top management support for mentoring and perceived accountability among mentors. An organizational climate supportive of mentoring is related to both mentor reports of relational quality and protégé reports of receiving more mentoring (Eby, Lockwood & Butts, 2006). Moreover, protégés' perceptions of mentor accountability are related to fewer bad mentoring experiences as reported by protégés (Eby, Lockwood & Butts, 2006). Thus, organizational support for mentoring and formal sanctions to deal with inappropriate mentor behavior may mitigate the effects of negative mentoring experiences for protégés and help shift focus to maximizing benefits of positive mentoring experiences.

In terms of formal mentoring programs, although previous research demonstrates the importance of mentor and protégé training (Allen, Eby & Lentz, 2006a;2006b), little is known about what to emphasize in training sessions. Our results suggest that topics such as the pros and cons of mentoring relationships, how to set realistic relationship expectations, trust-building, effective conflict management, and how to recognize problems in the mentorship may be important to include, especially for protégés. Our results also highlight the importance of having procedures in place to allow one or both individuals to exit a mentoring relationship without negative repercussions since bad mentoring experiences contributed significantly to the prediction of intentions to exit the relationship. This has been offered as a recommendation for the design of formal mentoring programs (Allen, Finkelstein & Poteet, 2009) and our findings confirm the importance of having such a system in place, particularly for protégés.

### *Limitations and directions for future research*

Like all research the present research has several limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the present research precludes strong cause-and-effect conclusions. While reverse causation is a possibility for some of the predicted associations, both theory and logic argue that relational experiences are likely to influence subjective states associated with the relationship. Nonetheless, mentoring relationships are dynamic (Eby et al., 2007), and as a consequence, reciprocal effects may also exist. For example, good relational experiences may engender positive reactions to the mentorship, which in turn increases the probability that good relational experiences will occur in the future. We also did not examine mediating variables to determine how and why negative experiences may relate to various protégé or mentor outcomes. For example, negative experiences with mentors may erode protégé self-esteem or engender fear of retaliation, which in turn may create psychological strain (Eby & Allen, 2002; Scandura, 1998). Different process-oriented variables may be operating for mentors. For instance, negative experiences with protégés may lead to mentor frustration or reduced commitment to the relationship, which in turn reduces relationship quality. A related limitation is our focus on individual effects, which does not take into consideration how events experienced by one partner may affect the other partner. Since relationships may become mutually reinforcing (or punishing) over time, it is possible that the occurrence of some mentoring experiences, bad and good, are due to quid pro quo behaviors precipitated by the other member. We know of no published mentoring research using a longitudinal, dyadic research design and realize the difficulty associated with collecting such data. Nonetheless, in order to fully understand mentor-protégé relational exchanges it will be important to move mentoring scholarship this direction.

We also recognize that the decision to focus on average good and bad relational experiences does not provide a nuanced understanding of how specific relational events influence the relationship. There are two specific concerns here. One concern is that there may be a critical incident or a specific relationship tipping point whereby one highly salient bad (or good) relational experience irrevocably alters the course of the relationship. Examining average relational experiences masks any such effects. Another concern is that we did not examine the relative predictive power of specific good and bad mentoring experiences to see if certain types of experiences were particularly potent predictors of protégé or mentor outcomes. For example, Eby (2007) suggests that bad mentoring experiences exist on a continuum where some experiences (e.g., manipulative behavior by the mentor) are more personally and professionally damaging than are others (e.g., mentor-protégé mismatches). Likewise, it may be that different experiences are more or less predictive of outcomes, depending on the specific outcome examined. For instance, the good experience of feeling personal satisfied by helping a protégé grow and develop may be a stronger predictor of mentor perceptions

of relationship quality than the receipt of help on the job from the protégé. We encourage researchers to build on our results by examining the relative predictive power of specific good and bad experiences.

Our findings are also bound by the choice of dependent variables. Other mentoring outcomes such as work attitudes, career perceptions, and career success may be related to good and bad mentoring experiences in different ways. We chose to focus on subjective states associated with the relationship in an effort to extend existing research on mentoring and answer recent calls for researchers to expand the criterion space of mentoring outcomes. Additional research is needed which examines the relative contribution of good and bad mentoring in predicting other relevant mentor and protégé outcomes at the individual and dyadic level of analysis. We should also note that although statistically significant, good and bad mentoring did not account for much variance in indicators of psychological well-being, particularly for mentors. Therefore, conclusions reached regarding the relative predictive power of good and bad mentoring needs to be tempered by this finding. In fact, our failure to find significant differences in mentor burnout between good and bad mentoring may be a function of the small amount of variance accounted for (only 4%) along with elevated standard errors, both of which make it more difficult to obtain statistical significance. Finally, common method variance is a potential concern. The hypotheses examined in the present study required either the protégé or the mentor to be the informant, given the subjective and personal nature of the constructs under study. In addition, the use of RWA should make this less of a concern in the present study since this data analysis procedure is designed to parse out unique effects by creating orthogonal predictor variables through a statistical transformation process.

In closing, the present research extends mentoring scholarship by examining the relative predictive power of good versus bad mentoring experiences for both protégé and mentor outcomes. Our findings illustrate the importance of considering the full range of mentoring experiences in order to provide a comprehensive perspective on mentoring, as well as the utility of examining relational processes from both the mentor and the protégé perspective. We hope that this research serves as a springboard for future research on the complex dynamics associated with mentoring relationships in the workplace.

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