




Do high performers always obtain supervisory career mentoring? The role of perspective-taking

Xiaoyu (Christina) Wang¹, Xiaotong (Janey) Zheng^{2*} ,
Yanjun Guan^{2,3} and Shuming Zhao⁴

¹School of Economics and Management, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

²Durham University Business School, Durham University, UK

³School of Humanities and Social Science, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen), China

⁴School of Business, Nanjing University, China

Drawing on social exchange theory, this study examines when and why high performers may fail to obtain supervisory career mentoring (SCM). Although high performance by protégés often makes SCM more efficient and successful, we argue that supervising mentors may be reluctant to offer SCM due to the victimization of high performers that has been shown by recent findings in the supervision literature. We further propose that high performers should be high in perspective-taking, a core relational competence and a key individual factor that moderates the relationship between protégé performance and SCM. Findings from a multi-source multi-time survey (Study 1) and an online experiment (Study 2) consistently show that when high performers are low in perspective-taking, they are less likely to receive SCM. Moreover, the findings from Study 2 also show that low perspective-taking by high performers significantly reduces supervisors' expected benefits from mentoring them, which in turn leads to the supervisors having low willingness to mentor. Our research therefore highlights the importance of taking into account the interaction between task and relational competence in understanding how protégé characteristics may influence SCM in organizational settings. The paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications.

Practitioner points

- At workplace, employees tend to focus on improving their performance and task competence and believe that high performance can help them receive more resources to develop their career. However, if they cannot imagine oneself in another's shoes, high performance can lead to less positive results.
- High performers should take others' perspective to understand what others feel and think to reduce potential threats seen by the supervisor and their colleagues. Therefore, task and relational competence are equally important.

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*Correspondence should be addressed to Xiaotong (Janey) Zheng, Durham University Business School, Durham University, Mill Hill Lane, Durham DH1 3LB, UK (email: xiaotong.zheng@durham.ac.uk).

- Organizations can help their employees develop this perspective-taking, including creating more opportunities (e.g., informal social events or formal training) for employees and their supervisors to understand each other's work roles, perspectives and values, which can help employees to understand their supervisors' views and stand in their supervisors' shoes.

It has been widely acknowledged that workplace mentoring is not only beneficial to protégés but also to mentors and organizations (Ivey & Dupré, 2020). For example, mentoring can accelerate protégé pay increases and promotions, and increase their satisfaction (Eby et al., 2013; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Van Vianen, Rosenauer, Homan, Horstmeier, & Voelpel, 2018). It also allows mentors to show transformational leadership, deliver better performance and achieve more career success (Chun, Sosik, & Yun, 2012; Ghosh & Reio, 2013). As for organizations, mentoring has been found to significantly increase protégés' commitment and decrease their turnover and absenteeism (Banerjee-Batist, Reio, & Rocco, 2019), thus serving as a practice critical for protégé retention (Germain, 2011). Both formal and informal forms of workplace mentoring have been distinguished, with the former initiated by the organization and the latter developed spontaneously between the mentor and the protégé (Holt, Markova, Dhaenens, Marler, & Heilmann, 2016; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Informal mentoring can be offered by protégés' direct supervisors (supervisory mentors) or by experienced colleagues in other departments or organizations (Eby & Robertson, 2020). Given that supervisors have extensive opportunities to manage employees' daily work activities and possess the power to delegate work tasks, mentoring support by supervisors (vs. non-supervisors) is generally more specific to protégés' developmental needs and more beneficial to their long-term growth (Baranik, Roling, & Eby, 2010; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Due to these advantageous effects, it is critical for protégés and organizations to understand which protégé characteristics can lead to more supervisory career mentoring (SCM, i.e., supervisors' 'personal and extra-organizational investment' in their employees' long-term career development, Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994, p. 1589).

The resource and power asymmetries in supervisor–subordinate relationships allow supervisory mentors to have complete discretion over their choice of protégés and the amount of effort they want to exert to mentor those chosen (Allen, 2007). This may depend on certain protégé characteristics, for example, higher levels of ego-resiliency (Baig, Bashir, & Ishaq, 2021), needs for help (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 2000) and willingness to learn (Allen, 2004). From a social exchange perspective, supervisory mentors are willing to build mentoring relationships with certain protégés when they expect greater returns from their investment in mentoring (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Since outstanding work performance generally indicates superior task competence, high performers are often deemed to have the ability or potential to make the mentoring process more efficient and successful (Allen, 2004; Allen et al., 2000). An effective mentoring relationship not only benefits protégés' career growth but also provides supervisory mentors with a loyal support base (Ragins & Scandura, 1999) and better group performance (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). It follows that protégés' performance (Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993), work ability (Allen, 2004) and career potential (Green & Bauer, 1995; Smith-Jentsch, Fullick, & Bencaz, 2012) can increase supervisory mentors' perceived benefits from mentoring, thus leading to greater willingness to mentor and more spontaneous mentoring relationships.

Although the extant literature generally supports the view that high performance attracts more SCM, there are still unresolved issues in the field. Given that supervisory

mentors are both mentors and supervisors, their willingness to mentor high performers also depends on a cost–benefit analysis from their perspective. Although high performance by protégés is generally favoured by supervisory mentors, recent research in the supervision literature has shown that supervisors may also have negative responses to high performers. For example, high performers are likely to be envied and undermined by their supervisors (Khan, Moss, Quratulain, & Hameed, 2018; Yu, Duffy, & Tepper, 2018) and they can even be perceived by their supervisors as troublemakers because they often fail to manage their relationships with other team members (Jensen, Patel, & Raver, 2014; Kim & Glomb, 2010, 2014; Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011; Walter, Lam, Van Der Vegt, Huang, & Miao, 2015). Therefore, in the eyes of supervisors, mentoring high performers may bring them and their teams potential risks and costs, which may prevent them from offering such subordinates SCM. In support of this view, the relationship between protégé performance and career mentoring is not particularly strong (e.g., $\rho = 0.33$ in Eby et al., 2013; $\rho = .20$ in Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008), which highlights the importance of examining when and why high performers fail to obtain SCM.

In this paper, we attempt to address this research gap by considering the role of relational competence (e.g., perspective-taking) in helping protégés attract more SCM. We argue that although outstanding performance indicates high task competence, protégés should also be equipped with *relational competence* (Hager & Gonczi, 1996) in order to encourage potential supervisory mentors to provide mentoring. Specifically, we propose that protégé *relational competence* (e.g., perspective-taking) can complement their *task competence* (e.g., work performance) and mitigate potential supervisory mentors’ concerns about mentoring high-performing protégés, which in turn will maximize their expected benefits from SCM. Specifically, we focus on protégé *perspective-taking*, which is defined as ‘the process of imagining the world from another’s vantage point or imagining oneself in another’s shoes’ (Ku et al., 2015, p. 110). As a fundamental aspect of relational competence (Davis, 1983), perspective-taking allows individuals to recognize the importance of understanding what others feel and think (Axtell, Parker, Holman, & Totterdell, 2007; Grant & Berry, 2011). Hence, high performers with higher perspective-taking are more likely to properly understand supervisory mentors’ thinking and avoid misunderstandings with collaborators, which will reduce mentors’ relational concerns about mentoring them and therefore increase their expected benefits from developing mentorships with high-performing protégés. Figure 1 shows our theoretical model.

Our theoretical perspective and empirical findings extend previous research in several ways. First, our paper bridges the mentoring and supervision literatures to contribute a more refined view of how high performers may fail to receive SCM. By introducing findings on victims of high performers (e.g., Khan et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2018) from the

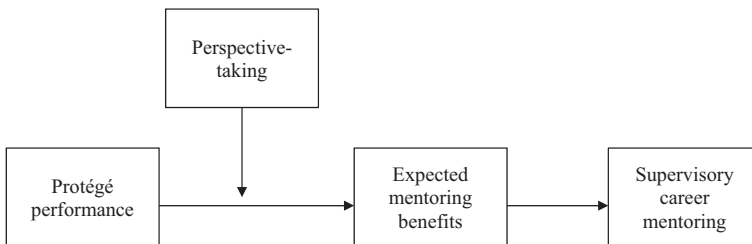


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

supervision literature into the mentoring literature, we provide a novel account to understand the potential dark side of high performers for supervisory mentors, which helps to explain the complicated relationship between protégé performance and SCM.

Second, we advance the antecedents of mentoring in the literature by taking *relational competence* into consideration. Existing empirical studies in the mentoring literature have focused on either protégés' job performance or overall competence without considering the distinct effects of different types of competence (Allen, 2004; Allen et al., 2000; Olian et al., 1993). As a result, the unique role of relational competence in developing informal mentoring relationships has been largely overlooked, which is problematic given that it plays a critical role in shaping the quality of social exchange (L'Abate, Cusinato, Maino, Colesso, & Scilletta, 2010). Our research advances understanding of factors that can mitigate supervisory mentors' negative concerns about high performers and the conditions under which high-performing protégés are more likely to obtain SCM.

Third, our paper answers the call by Eby et al. (2013) to test the causal relationship between protégé performance and SCM. In addition to testing our model with a multi-source multi-time survey design (Study 1), we have conducted an experimental study (Study 2) in which we manipulated protégé performance and perspective-taking to test their effects on supervisors' perceived mentoring benefits and their willingness to provide SCM, which provides a more stringent test of the casual relationships among these variables.

Finally, we also contribute to the supervision literature that focuses on understanding the victimization of high performers in the workplace (e.g., Jensen et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2018; Lam et al., 2011). Our findings suggest that perspective-taking, a key relational competence, can help high performers to maintain positive relationships in the workplace. They not only provide important insights into high-performing subordinate-victimization phenomena but also have practical implications to reduce mistreatment of high performers.

We conducted two studies in China designed to examine the effect of the interaction between protégé performance and perspective-taking on cost–benefit analysis of SCM. Given that mentorships are commonplace in China (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006) and a wealth of recently published research on supervisory mentoring has used Chinese samples (e.g., Kao, Rogers, Spitzmueller, Lin, & Lin, 2014; Liang & Gong, 2013; Pan, Sun, & Chow, 2011), our first study collected multi-source and multi-time survey data from store-service employees working in a Chinese logistics company to examine whether perspective-taking ability can complement the functions of high performance to obtain SCM. In the second study, we conducted an online experiment involving Chinese participants to replicate the findings from Study 1 and establish a causal link between protégé performance, perspective-taking and SCM via expected mentoring benefits.

Theory and hypothesis development

A cost–benefit analysis of SCM

According to social exchange theory, individuals are more likely to enter a relationship in which they can get favourable returns from their investments of time and effort (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). However, providing SCM brings supervisory mentors both benefits and costs in both formal and informal mentorships (e.g., Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2006; Eby & Robertson, 2020). For example, protégés

provide feedback on mentors' informal career mentoring and offer work-related information which may enhance the mentor's performance (Gentry, Weber, & Sadri, 2008; Ramaswami & Dreher, 2007). If protégés progress well after receiving career mentoring, their mentors may also obtain rewards and recognition for developing talents (in both informal and formal mentoring relationships; Eby et al., 2006). In addition, successful protégés can strengthen their mentors' power within organizations and create a loyal support base for them (in informal mentoring relationships; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). However, providing mentoring inevitably requires mentors to invest time and commitment (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). They have to make a great deal of extra-role effort in providing career mentoring, which may interfere with the completion of their own work tasks (Allen, 2004; Allen et al., 1997). If a protégé performs poorly, others may question the supervisory mentor's leadership capacity and managerial performance (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). Therefore, supervisors without the responsibility imposed by formal mentoring programmes must conduct cost–benefit analysis to decide who they will develop a mentoring relationship with. In fact, researchers have found that even if supervisors have a high dispositional tendency to be a mentor (e.g., positive affectivity, Aryee, Chay, & Chew, 1996; upward striving, Allen et al., 1997; other-oriented empathy, Allen, 2003), they are still very cautious in selecting and investing in *appropriate* subordinates as protégés.

Protégé performance and SCM

Extant research in the mentoring literature has established that high performers are more likely to obtain SCM because their higher competence allows them to progress faster than poor performers, which boosts their supervisory mentors' confidence in obtaining more benefits as returns (Allen, 2007). For example, high-performing protégés can enhance group performance, which evidences their supervisory mentors' leadership capacity (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). In addition to bringing more benefits, high performers may bring their supervisory mentors fewer costs (e.g., time and effort in providing career mentoring) because they have more technical knowledge and can progress more quickly (Kram, 1985). Consistently, Olian et al. (1993) find that supervisory mentors are more willing to mentor high-performing protégés because of their cost–benefit advantages.

However, in contrast to the arguments above, research in the supervision literature has shown that high performers may not always be favoured by their supervisors. For example, high performers may be envied by their supervisors (Tariq, Weng, Ilies, & Khan, 2021; Yu et al., 2018). Drawing on social dominance theory, Khan et al. (2018) demonstrate that a perceived status threat from their high performance may lead to their being mistreated by supervisors. In addition to this, high performers may also suffer co-worker exclusion (Kim & Glomb, 2010). Specifically, over-performing group members may suffer workplace ostracism for violating average-performance norms (Homans, 1958; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). High performers are also more likely to be targets of victimization because of envy by other group members' (Jensen et al., 2014; Kim & Glomb, 2010, 2014). In sum, recent findings in the supervision literature suggest that high performers in the workplace can be problematic because they may either threaten supervisor self-views or cause envy and conflict in the group. We therefore maintain that supervisory mentors may be less willing to provide SCM because of threats from high performers. At the same time, they may fear that mentoring high performers may result in

worse working relationships among group members, which may lead to negative group cohesion.

The moderating effect of perspective-taking

From a social exchange perspective, there are two types of exchange resources: economic (instrumental, specific and expected resources) and socioemotional (unspecified, open-ended and beyond expectations) (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). In a supervisory mentor's considerations about whether to provide SCM, the former are reflected in performance at work, which indicates a protégé's *task competence*. As discussed above, a protégé's ability to deal with work tasks contributes to his or her supervisory mentor's instrumental benefits in the workplace. The latter are related to *relational competence*, which is also important for potential protégés wishing to obtain SCM because ability to deal with interpersonal relationships can help them build better relationships with supervisory mentors. Although there has been little research exploring relational competence as an antecedent of informal SCM, social skills (Schenk et al., 2020) and impression management tactics (e.g., Liu, Wang, & Wayne, 2015) have been found to positively predict the quality of formal mentoring relationships.

We focus on perspective-taking as a relational competence because it is at the core of social skills and can advance the mentoring literature beyond the social skills previously studied (e.g., impression management tactics). Unlike impression-management tactics with the clear intention of creating a desired impression through flattery, compliments and conformity (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008), perspective-taking is a means to effectively react to mixed-motive social interactions by attempting to understand others' thoughts and feelings (Ku, Wang, & Galinsky, 2015). Since it allows individuals to increase their approachability and coordination (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005), empirical studies have shown that perspective-taking greatly contributes to fostering mutual understanding and social coordination and reducing misunderstandings and relational conflicts in the workplace (Hoever, Van Knippenberg, Van Ginkel, & Barkema, 2012; Parker, Atkins, & Axtell, 2008; Parker & Axtell, 2001). Despite its critical role in facilitating social bonds, not all individuals fully develop this relational competence (Epley & Caruso, 2012). Below we show how perspective-taking – a particularly important relational competence – enables high performers to become *appropriate* protégés in the eyes of supervisory mentors. This sets the stage for the proposed moderating role of perspective-taking in the relationship between protégé performance and SCM.

First, perspective-taking can reduce supervisory mentors' concerns that high performers may challenge their hierarchical status. High performers, who are usually achievement-driven, often show a strong desire to move up within their organization (Judge & Bretz, 1992). At the same time, high performers are more likely to subconsciously challenge their supervisors' authority in public, leading to the supervisors feeling offended and threatened (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). As a response, supervisory mentors may strategically withdraw their investment or even mistreat their high-performing protégés (e.g., abusive supervision, Khan et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2018) to re-establish control. High-performing protégés with high perspective-taking are more likely to avoid making their supervisory mentors feel uncomfortable and uneasy. This is because, unlike ingratiation and political skills, perspective-taking allows them to respond to supervisory mentors' needs in a flexible manner (Blumer, 1969; Krauss & Fussell, 1991). In their interactions with supervisory mentors, they tend to communicate messages about their preferences in supervisory mentor-matching language (Blumer,

1969), which fosters mutual understanding and avoids their integrity being questioned. In addition, perspective-taking can lead to helping and cooperative behaviours (Parker & Axtell, 2001), which can make high-performing protégés become allies of their supervisory mentors. Therefore, high performers with high perspective-taking abilities can promote beneficial interactions in the workplace and further strengthen social bonds with their supervisory mentors. For a supervisory mentor, selecting a 'flexible and responsive' high-performing protégé to provide with career mentoring can maximize their benefits, that is, instrumental support from a high-performing protégé combined with the psychological safety of expecting their loyalty. Otherwise, the supervisory mentor's expected benefits from SCM would be reduced due to concerns about future challenges from high-performing protégés, leading to less willingness to offer SCM.

In addition, perspective-taking can also decrease a supervisory mentor's concerns about high performers' relationships with their peers in work groups. Research on envy has shown that it may be difficult for high performers to get along with their co-workers (Kim & Glomb, 2010; Lam et al., 2011; Tesser, 1988). This is because high performers tend to monopolize more valuable resources and have higher social status than their peers, which can result in peer envy and subsequent covert negative peer acts, for example, withholding job-related information and silent treatment (Jensen et al., 2014). Therefore, supervisory mentors are less likely to provide high performers with career mentoring if they are unable to work together with their peers because they may have negative impacts on team performance and the supervisory mentor's leadership effectiveness (Ragins, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). However, if high performers are able to take others' perspectives, the opposite may hold. Perspective-taking will allow high-performing protégés to effectively engage in group collaboration because it reduces self-serving attributions of their job performance (Galper, 1976) and contributes to understanding their working roles in relation to others (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Therefore, perspective-taking enables high-performing protégés to better understand others, to share resources and to interact with others (Epley, Caruso, & Bazerman, 2006; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011), which in turn will reduce conflicts with group members (Falk & Johnson, 1977; Hoever et al., 2012). These benefits deriving from perspective-taking will make high-performing protégés more valuable in the eyes of supervisory mentors. Hence, supervisory mentors are more likely to provide high-performing protégés who also have high perspective-taking capabilities with career mentoring.

In sum, although high performers have some advantages in attracting SCM because their high competence may bring their supervisory mentors more benefits, high performance without perspective-taking ability is insufficient to obtain SCM. Perspective-taking abilities can effectively offset the weaknesses of high performers in maintaining workplace relationships and reduce supervisors' relational concerns about mentoring them. They will influence supervisory mentors' expected benefits from building the mentoring relationship with high performers and their willingness to provide SCM. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Perspective-taking moderates the relationship between protégé performance and SCM, so that the positive relationship between protégé performance and SCM is significantly weakened when perspective-taking is low rather than high.

Hypothesis 2. Supervisory mentors' expected mentoring benefits mediate the interaction effect between protégé performance and perspective-taking on SCM, so that the indirect effect of protégé performance on SCM via expected mentoring benefits will be lower when protégé perspective-taking is low rather than high.

STUDY I

Study 1 was conducted to evaluate Hypothesis 1 and provide initial support for the moderating effect of perspective-taking on the relationship between protégé performance and SCM. We collected data from employees and their supervisors in a Chinese company at different time points.

Method

Sample and procedure

To minimize common method bias, we collected our data using a multi-time and multi-source method (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The data came from a Chinese logistics company which has small-sized chain stores involving logistics. They are located in the city of Nanjing and mainly serve neighbourhoods. At Time 1, the employees were asked to answer demographic questions and ones about their perspective-taking ability, and their supervisors were asked to rate each subordinate's task performance. At Time 2 a month later, the employees were asked to rate the career mentoring they received from their supervisors.

Two website links, one for the employees and the other for the supervisors, were emailed to the participants by the HR manager. The participants were assured of confidentiality and that their participation was voluntary. The participants' work IDs were only requested to enable matching of employee and supervisor data and data collected at different times. 593 employees and 140 matched supervisors were invited to take part in the study. 417 employee surveys and 114 supervisor surveys were returned in the first wave and 306 employee surveys were returned in the second wave. Because supervisor-rated task performance was required for the data analysis, we deleted 102 employees' responses which we were unable to match with their supervisors' task performance ratings. The final sample consisted of 204 sets of usable and matched questionnaires nested in 84 supervisors, with a final response rate of 34.4%.

Among the employees, 97.8% were female and 2.2% were male. The average age was 37.76 years ($SD = 6.82$). They had worked for the company for an average of 1.26 years ($SD = 0.63$). Regarding their education, 39.7% had a middle school certificate, 40.8% a high school certificate, 17.9% an associate degree and 1.6% a bachelor's degree. Among the supervisors, 22.4% were male and 77.6% were female. Their average age was 34.23 years ($SD = 6.84$). They had worked for the company for an average of 1.71 years ($SD = 0.62$). 34.2% of them had a middle school certificate, 31.6% a high school certificate, 28.9% an associate degree and 5.3% a bachelor's degree.

Measures

The employee and supervisor surveys were administered in Chinese. The translation of the original English language version of the questionnaire into Chinese was performed

following the standard translation and back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). All the measures used a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Protégé perspective-taking (subordinate rated at Time 1) was measured with three items adapted from Davis (1983). These were: ‘When working with others in the workplace, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place’; ‘I try to understand others in the workplace better by imagining how things look from their perspective’; and ‘When working with others in the workplace, I usually try to put myself in their shoes for a while’. Cronbach’s α was .74.

Protégé task performance (supervisor rated at Time 1) was measured using four items from Van Dyne and LePine (1998) to measure *supervisor-rated task performance*. One example is ‘This subordinate fulfills the responsibilities specified in his/her job description’. Cronbach’s α was .86.

Supervisory career mentoring (SCM) (subordinate rated at Time 2) was measured using six items from the career development subscale in Scandura and Ragins (1993)’s mentoring scale. An example is ‘My supervisor has devoted special time and consideration to my career’. Cronbach’s α was .89.

Analytic strategy

As our employee respondents were clustered in the data, to correct for bias in the standard error estimates we used cluster-robust standard errors (CR-SEs) (also referred to as empirical standard errors and sandwich estimators; McNeish, Stapleton, & Silverman, 2017). Our aim was to correct for bias based on the residuals to yield more accurate regression coefficient estimates.

Results

Preliminary results

The descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations and correlations, are presented in Table 1. We also conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to evaluate the factor structure of our variables using Mplus. The model indices of the original hypothesized three-factor model indicated poor model fit: $\chi^2(62) = 237.49$, $p < .001$, CFI = .88, RMSEA = .12, 95% CI [0.10, 0.13], SRMR = .06. The modification indices (MI) provided by Mplus indicated that the residual of SCM item 5 (i.e., ‘My supervisor helps me coordinate professional goals’) and SCM item 6 (i.e., ‘My supervisor has devoted special time and consideration to my career’) were correlated, MI 79.5, which may explain the poor model fit indices for the standard CFA model. Following non-standard CFA rules (Kline, 2015), we modified the standard CFA model by correlating the measurement errors of these two items in Mplus, that is, they were freely estimated. Our data fit the modified CFA model better: $\chi^2(61) = 167.98$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .09, 90% CI [0.08, 0.11], SRMR = .05. In addition, all the items had significant factor loadings on their factors. To check the discriminant validity of the two subordinate-reported variables, that is, perspective-taking and SCM, we compared the hypothesized three-factor model with an alternative CFA model, $\chi^2(63) = 286.20$, $p < .001$, CFI = .86, RMSEA = .13, 90% CI [0.11, 0.14], SRMR = .08, which combined the items of these two variables into one factor. Our hypothesized three-factor model was significantly better than the alternative model, with $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 118.22$, $p < .001$, Δ CFI = .07, Δ RMSE = .04, Δ SRMR = .03.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations between scales in the two studies

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Study 1 (N = 204)										
1. Gender	1.98	0.15								
2. Age	37.76	6.82	.07							
3. Education	2.59	1.08	.08	-.08						
4. Tenure	1.26	0.63	-.08	.12	.02					
5. Supervisor-rated task performance	6.08	0.71	.18**	-.05	.08	.18*				
6. Perspective-taking	5.62	0.84	-.05	-.08	.10	-.06	.14*			
7. Supervisory career mentoring	5.11	0.88	-.13	-.05	.04	-.04	.16*	.40**		
8. The interaction term	0.08	0.56	.09	.04	-.04	-.10	-.04	-.31	.15*	—
Study 2 (N = 192)										
1. Gender	1.37	0.48								
2. Age	32.91	5.27	-.07							
3. Education	4.06	0.50	-.04	-.14						
4. Tenure	7.52	4.47	-.11	.75**	-.12					
5. Subordinate performance ^a	1.49	0.50	.07	.01	.10	-.00	.04			
6. Perspective-taking ^b	1.49	0.50	-.81	-.04	-.11	-.00	.48**	.14*		
7. Supervisory career mentoring	5.26	0.89	.06	-.01	-.04	.01	.70**	.70**	.45**	
8. The interaction term	2.23	1.11	-.03	-.02	-.01	-.01	.45**	.32**	.61**	.56**
9. Cost-benefit analysis	4.62	1.38	.03	-.06	-.08	-.06				

^a1 = low performance and 2 = high performance; ^b1 = low perspective-taking and 2 = high perspective-taking; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). The interactive term = subordinate performance * perspective-taking.

Hypothesis testing

To test Hypothesis 1, we regressed SCM at Time 2 on task performance ($B = .18$, $SE = .08$, $p = .02$), perspective-taking ($B = .37$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$) and the interactive term. As predicted in Hypothesis 1, the interaction effect of task performance and perspective-taking was positive and significant: $B = .25$, $SE = .11$, $p = .02$. The interaction patterns are plotted in Figure 2. Simple slope analysis suggests that the relationship between task performance and SCM was stronger when perspective-taking was higher (1 SD above the mean; $B = .35$, $p < .001$) than when it was low (1 SD below the mean; $B = -.06$, ns). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported in Study 1.

Discussion

Although Study 1 was conducted with a multi-source and multi-wave design, it had several limitations. First, there was a large percentage of female employees in the sample, although this gender distribution is representative of the logistic industry in China. Thus, it was necessary to replicate the findings of Study 1 in a sex-balanced sample. In addition, perspective-taking was reported in Study 1 by protégés, which might be biased by positive self-perceptions. This is worth noting because our research focuses on factors influencing protégé selection from the supervisory mentor's perspective. Therefore, it was necessary to measure perspective-taking from the supervisory mentor's perspective and examine how it affects supervisory mentors' decisions to provide SCM. Furthermore, the field study was limited in its ability to examine causality in our proposed relationships. Therefore, we also attempted to examine the causal relationships with an experimental study (Study 2).

STUDY 2

Study 2 used an experimental design to replicate the results of Study 1 and provide stronger evidence of causality in the proposed relationships. In addition, Study 2 tested the full theoretical model including the mediator, the expected benefits of SCM.

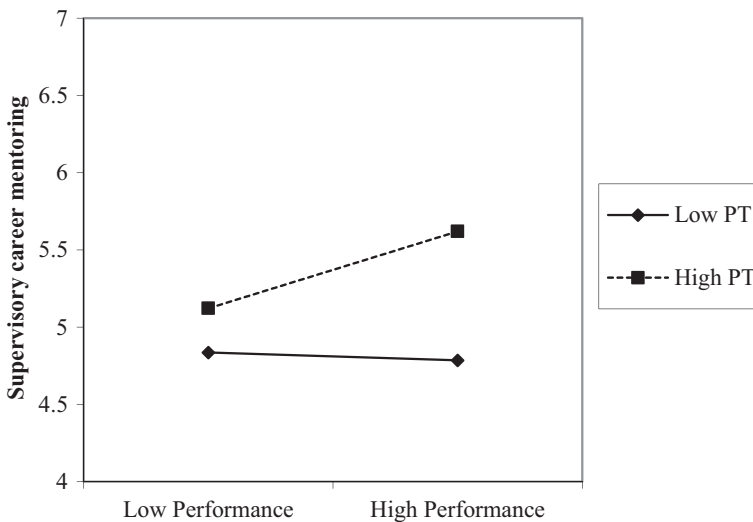


Figure 2. The interactive effect of protégé performance and perspective-taking (PT) on supervisory career mentoring.

Method

Participants and design

We collected data from 192 full-time employees in China. They were recruited through an online Chinese survey platform (<https://www.wjx.cn/>) very similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk or Prolific. The instructions and questionnaire were presented in Chinese. We recruited participants aged between 18 and 60 who were employed in organizations. 63% of the participants were male. They had an average age of 32.91 years ($SD = 5.27$) and an average organizational tenure of 7.52 years ($SD = 4.47$). 1.5% had a high school certificate, 5.2% an associate degree, 79.2% a bachelor's degree and 14.1% a post-graduate degree.

Study 2 used a 2 (subordinate performance: high vs. low) by 2 (perspective-taking: high vs. low) design. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. On average they took 9 min to complete the whole experiment and received ¥13 (equivalent to \$1.89) for their efforts. They were asked to carefully read the following scenario and to imagine how they would feel and what they would think in the situation.

Tengfei is a medium-sized company that produces electrical products. You have been in the company for five years and in a leadership position for two years. As a middle-level manager in the company, you take leadership responsibilities. For example, you communicate with your subordinates about HR policies and strategic development goals. You also help your subordinates set career goals and make plans. Meanwhile, you are also a mentor and select subordinates to develop their careers.

Protégé task performance

The protégé candidate's name in the scenario, Yang, is gender-neutral in Chinese. Participants in the high (low) protégé task performance condition read the following information:

Yang is a sales representative in your department. His/her job is to collect marketing data, deal with customer relationships and establish new commercial partners. In general, Yang performs very well (very badly). He/she has excellent (poor) sales skills and thus is (un)able to effectively complete tasks that you delegate to him/her and (or) to meet the sales target set for him/her. Among the other subordinates, Yang has always been the top (worst) sales representative in your department. In the past four seasons, Yang's performance has always been in the top (bottom) 20% in your department.

Protégé perspective-taking

We created perspective-taking vignettes according to Davis's (1983) scale. Participants in the high (low) perspective-taking ability condition read the following information:

Yang is (not) considerate and (never) puts him/herself in others' positions. At work, Yang can (not) understand and feel for others. When doing projects with other group members, Yang often (never) adjusts his/her working schedule. Compared to other employees, Yang does better (worse) at putting him/herself in your position to understand you and understand your leadership and decisions.

Supervisory career mentoring

We employed the six items which were used in Study 1 to measure SCM. We asked the participants to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements according to the scenario they had just read (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The items were 'I would like to devote special time and consideration to Yang's career', 'I would like to give Yang special coaching on the job' and 'I would like to advise Yang of promotional opportunities'. Cronbach's α was .89.

Expected mentoring benefits

We adapted three items from Ragins and Scandura (1999) to evaluate the benefits expected from mentoring Yang in the vignette. We asked the participants to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree): 'I believe that providing Yang with career development guidance will give me more rewards compared to the time and effort I devote'; 'There are far more advantages than disadvantages in advising Yang on career development' and 'I believe that being Yang's career mentor will bring me more benefits than burdens'.

Results*Manipulation check*

After they had read the scenarios, we asked the participants to evaluate Yang's task performance and perspective-taking ability to test whether our manipulation was successful. The items were the same as those used in Study 1.

Our analysis using two-way variance analysis (ANOVA) revealed a significant main effect of the experimental conditions on Yang's perceived task performance, $F(1, 190) = 917.72, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .83$, indicating that the participants perceived Yang's performance as being significantly higher in the high condition ($M = 6.12, SD = 0.74$) than in the low condition ($M = 2.24, SD = 1.01$). Similar findings were obtained when testing the main effect of the experimental conditions on perspective-taking, $F(1, 190) = 574.20, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .75$, indicating that the participants perceived significantly higher perspective-taking in the high condition ($M = 5.86, SD = 0.88$) than in the low condition ($M = 2.23, SD = 1.19$).

Hypothesis testing

The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. To test the hypotheses, we first conducted a variance analysis (ANOVA) to examine the interaction effect of task performance and perspective-taking on SCM. Next, to examine Hypothesis 2 we first examined the interactive effect of task performance and perspective-taking on the expected benefits from mentoring and then we examined the indirect effect of subordinate performance on SCM via the expected benefits from mentoring under the different conditions of subordinate perspective-taking (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007).

Supervisory career mentoring

The results showed that both task performance and perspective-taking had positive main effects: $F(1, 188) = 57.08, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$ and $F(1, 188) = 3.94, p = .049$, partial $\eta^2 = .021$ respectively. The ANOVA results also indicated a significant interactive effect of task performance and perspective-taking on SCM: $F(1, 188) = 4.26, p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. The means of SCM under the different conditions are reported in Figure 3. Specifically, SCM was significantly lower when protégé task performance was high and perspective-taking was low ($M = 5.46, SD = 0.84$) than when task performance and perspective-taking were both high ($M = 5.92, SD = 0.49$), $t(92) = 3.22, p = .002$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported (Table 2).

Expected mentoring benefits

The main effects of task performance and perspective-taking were both positive: $F(1, 188) = 54.16, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$ and $F(1, 188) = 24.98, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$ respectively. In addition, ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between task performance and perspective-taking in predicting the expected benefits from mentoring, $F(1, 188) = 7.00, p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Specifically, when protégé task performance was high, the participants in the low-perspective-taking condition expected significantly lower benefits from mentoring ($M = 4.60, SD = 1.16$) than those in the high-perspective-taking condition ($M = 5.87, SD = 0.59$), $t(92) = 6.68, p < .001$. The means are reported in Figure 3.

Conditional indirect effect

We examined the indirect effect of task performance on SCM via the expected mentoring benefits in the high and low perspective-taking conditions by using PROCESS 3.2 Model 7 (Hayes, 2018), and as in Study 1 we controlled for the participants' gender, age, education and organizational tenure. As hypothesized, we found a significant moderated mediation effect ($B = .29, SE = .13, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.56]$, excluding zero). The conditional indirect effect of protégé task performance on SCM via perceived benefits was weaker when protégé perspective-taking was low ($B = .26, SE = .09, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.10, 0.45]$, excluding zero) than when it was high ($B = .55, SE = .12, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.34, 0.80]$, excluding zero), difference = $.29, SE = .13, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.56]$, excluding zero. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

Study 2 used a sex-balanced sample to replicate the findings of Study 1 and provide casual support for the interactive effects of protégé task performance and perspective-taking on SCM. In addition, it also examined the mediating effect of expected mentoring benefits from the supervisory mentor's perspective, providing full support for our theoretical model. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that vignette design has its limitations. Although our vignette design and implementation follow Aguinis and Bradley's (2014) best practice recommendations with carefully constructed descriptions of the two-by-two scenarios, the manipulation of task performance and perspective-taking simplified real situations. In addition, unlike Study 1, SCM was measured by the supervisory mentor not the protégé, due to the experimental design. Although behaviour ratings might be more accurate and objective if rated by others rather than the participants, research has shown

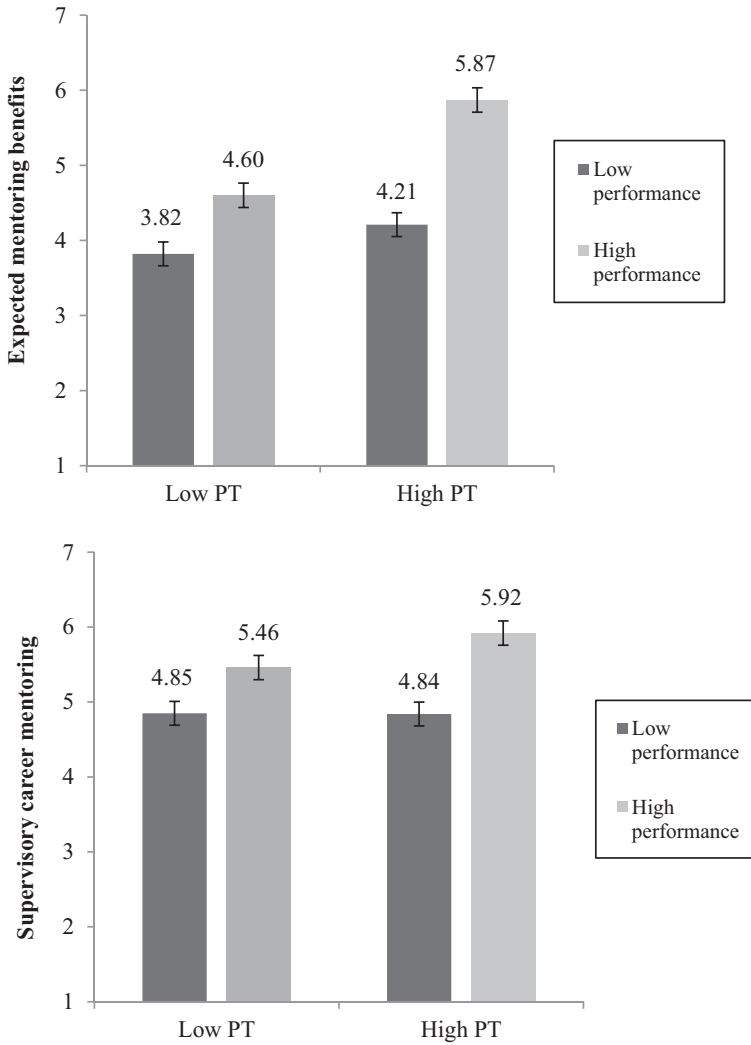


Figure 3. The interactive effect of protégé performance and perspective-taking (PT) on the perceived benefits from mentoring and supervisory career mentoring.

that similar conclusions can be drawn regardless of whether self-ratings or other-ratings of extra-role behaviours are used (Carpenter, Berry, & Houston, 2014).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Drawing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), we have proposed and examined a framework to investigate when and why high performers may fail to attract more SCM, which is vital for their career development. We have found that supervisory mentors may tend to choose protégés who have higher performance, but the positive effect of protégé performance on SCM will be significantly weakened by a low level of perspective-taking. This interplay effect is explained by a cost–benefit analysis of mentoring a particular

Table 2. Path Estimates for Hypothesis 2 in Study 2

Effects						
	Subordinate performance →	Expected mentoring benefits	Expected mentoring benefits → SCM	Indirect	Direct	Total
Low PT	0.80***		0.32***	0.26** [0.10, 0.45]	0.45***	0.71***
High PT	1.70***		0.32***	0.55** [0.34, 0.80]	0.45***	1.00***
Difference	0.90***		—	0.29** [0.07, 0.56]	—	0.29**

Notes. PT = perspective-taking; SCM = supervisory career mentoring.

$N = 192$. Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented. Differences in the effects were computed by subtracting those when perspective-taking was low from those when perspective-taking was high. The test for the difference in the indirect effect is equivalent to a test of mediated moderation. Significance tests of the indirect and total effects and differences between them are based on bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from bootstrapping estimates with 5,000 samples, as suggested in Edwards and Lambert (2007).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

protégé. Our hypotheses have been supported in two empirical studies: a multi-source multi-wave study to investigate the interactive effects between protégé task performance and perspective-taking on SCM; and an online experimental study where these two competencies were manipulated to investigate a moderated mediation model to demonstrate the mediation role of the expected mentoring benefits. These findings indicate that both task competence (i.e., high task performance) and relational competence (i.e., perspective-taking) might be necessary to obtain higher levels of SCM. Our research has both theoretical and practical implications, which we outline in the following sections.

Theoretical implications

We extend the existing mentoring literature in two ways. First, our research extends the scope of the antecedents of SCM by taking relational competence into consideration to provide a comprehensive picture of how supervisory mentors view potential protégés with high competence in informal mentoring processes. Previous studies have predominantly focused on task competence (Allen, 2004; Allen et al., 2000; Kram, 1985; Olian et al., 1993) while the role of protégés' relational competence in the mentoring decision-making process has been largely overlooked. As one of the first papers to present and examine the value of perspective-taking in building informal supervisor-subordinate mentoring relationships, our results highlight the importance of taking a comprehensive perspective when investigating protégé characteristics as predictors of SCM. More importantly, our research advances the understanding that high performance may not always attract SCM, and lacking perspective-taking can weaken this advantage of high performers in developing mentorships. The existing mentoring research has taken it for granted that the positive relationship between protégé performance and SCM will hold under any conditions. However, since high performers have been found to suffer some mistreatment in the workplace (e.g., Khan et al., 2018; Kim & Glomb, 2010), our finding from Study 1 that the positive association between protégé performance and SCM is statistically non-significant when perspective-taking is low has challenged the existing mentoring literature.

Therefore, our research fills the key patch in the whole picture and opens a new avenue for future research on mentoring by showing the importance of taking relational competence into consideration. We first call for future research to investigate other relational characteristics that enable potential protégés, especially those with high performance, to obtain favours from supervisory mentors, for example, benevolence (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) because it results in showing care for other people's welfare and needs. In addition, given that this research only focuses on the moderating effect of protégés' perspective-taking, a future direction may be to investigate whether and how supervisory mentors' perspective-taking may influence their career mentoring, especially that of high-performing protégés. Such examinations are important because the positive effects of perspective-taking reducing misunderstandings and relational conflicts are a reciprocal process (Ku et al., 2015), meaning that supervisory mentors with high perspective-taking can also foster mutual understanding and social coordination in mentor-protégé relationships. In fact, perspective-taking may be more important for supervisory mentors than for protégés because research has shown that power generally decreases perspective-taking (Galinsky et al., 2005; Muscatell et al., 2012). Therefore, future research should further explore the role of supervisory mentors' perspective-taking in mentoring relationships.

Although our results show that higher performers with high perspective-taking are more likely to receive SCM because they are associated with greater benefits and fewer costs, there might exist other factors which have been overlooked in the literature that can explain mentors' psychological processes and motivations to mentor low performers. In fact, low performers are in more need of SCM in the workplace than high performers. Although mentoring a low performer may bring many instrumental benefits, it will also bring the mentor psychosocial rewards, such as intrinsic satisfaction and pleasure in helping others (Ghosh & Reio, 2013). Therefore, we call for more research to reveal factors that can motivate supervisors to mentor low performers. For example, empathy (Allen, 2003) might be an important mechanism that can explain supervisors' willingness to mentor low performers. Although both empathy and perspective-taking reflect understanding others (Gregory, Moates, & Gregory, 2011), recent empirical evidence has shown that each can occur independently (Batson, 2011). In addition, meta-analytical results indicate their divergent effects on work-related outcomes (Longmire & Harrison, 2018). In addition, we encourage future research to investigate cognitive similarity (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2019) between mentors and protégés, which may advance our understanding of mentoring low performers. In addition, supervisors' perspective-taking is relevant. Supervisors with high perspective-taking are more likely to imagine themselves in their subordinates' shoes to understand them and mentor them. Furthermore, the quality of the dyadic relationship might be important to consider. Previous research (e.g., Zheng, Zheng, Wu, Yao, & Wang, 2021) has shown that protégés' relationship-building behaviours can increase the amount of supervisory mentoring they receive. Therefore, there might be an interaction effect between protégés' performance and relationship-building behaviour on SCM, which is worth future investigation.

Second, our paper answers Eby et al.'s (2006) call for more research on predictors of the benefits mentors expect from mentoring by suggesting that protégé characteristics are important factors to consider. To the best of our knowledge, there is only one study on supervisory mentors' previous mentoring experience as an antecedent of cost-benefit analysis (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). We have therefore extended the scope of the antecedents of cost-benefit analysis of mentoring by investigating how protégé competence is related to supervisor expected mentoring benefits, and suggest that both protégé task and relational competence are important factors in mentors' cost-benefit analyses. Future research will benefit from expanding the range of factors in mentors' cost-benefit analyses by considering relational factors (e.g., relationship-building behaviour, Zheng et al., 2021).

Moreover, our research also contributes to the recent literature on employee performance which has focused on understanding victimization of high performers in the workplace. Prior research has shown that high performers may suffer from abusive supervision (Khan et al., 2018) and being excluded by their colleagues (Kim & Glomb, 2010, 2014). Our research, on the one hand, suggests that high performers may struggle with their career development because they are able to receive less SCM. On the other hand, our research also provides a remedy for this and suggests that if high performers are also high in perspective-taking they are able to obtain more SCM in the workplace. Therefore, it sheds light on how employees can inhibit or even reverse the high-performing-victimization phenomenon. We call for more research investigating how high performers can obtain positive, rather than negative, reactions and affect from supervisors and colleagues, for example, recognition, appreciation, liking, etc.

Implications for practice

As a result of our finding that protégé perspective-taking can offset the downsides of high performance in obtaining the favour of supervisory mentors, we recommend that all employees, especially high performers, should intentionally develop their perspective-taking competence in order to reduce their supervisors' relational concerns and obtain SCM. Although people vary in their dispositional tendency to take others' perspectives, it has been shown by previous studies that strong motivation can enable employees to adopt others' views in their thinking in work contexts (Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky et al., 2005). Therefore, high performers should find it useful to cultivate their perspective-taking to increase their possibility of obtaining their supervisors' favour. More importantly, an increase in high performers' relational competence can reduce supervisors' perceptions of challenges from them and the envy of their co-workers. Without relational barriers in the workplace, high performers who are also high in perspective-taking are more likely to have career success. Given the important role of perspective-taking, we would like to draw the attention of senior managers in organizations to taking action to help their employees develop this relational competence. For example, organizations can create more opportunities (e.g., informal social events or formal training) for employees and their supervisors to understand each other's work roles, perspectives and values, which can help employees to understand their supervisors' views and imagine standing in their shoes. By doing so, organizations can promote collaboration within the organization and further improve organizational effectiveness. Finally, given that high performers are organizations' most important human capital, helping them obtain sufficient mentoring to advance their careers and contribute to the organization would be efficient resource utilization.

Limitations and future research

Our study is not without its limitations, which suggests several future research directions. First, our research has focused on informal SCM, which is different from formal mentoring programmes in organizations. In the latter case, supervisory mentors may have less flexibility in choosing protégés to mentor (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Because formal and informal mentorships differ in terms of relationship-building and relationship structure (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), the influence of protégé competence on supervisory mentors' willingness to take part in different types of mentoring may differ too. For example, organizational factors (e.g., HRM structure or organization regulations) rather than individual-level factors might have stronger effects on formal mentoring. Therefore, future research may benefit from investigating whether the influence of protégé competence, including task competence and relational competence, can be extended to formal mentoring programmes. In addition, extending our protégé competence framework to formal mentoring programs can answer the research call by Eby and Lockwood (2005) to address the research gap resulting from the mentoring literature predominately only focusing on informal or spontaneously developed mentoring relationships. We also call for more future research to investigate whether and how protégé competence can influence supervisor-subordinate mentoring relationships in formal programmes.

Second, future research should consider whether the interaction patterns we have found can be generalized to organizations with flatter structures. In such organizations, instead of direct supervisors, senior colleagues who have longer organizational tenure but are at the same organizational level may take the responsibility of mentoring. Since mentors tend to be assumed to have higher social status in organizations (Liu, Liu, Kwan, &

Mao, 2009), protégés, especially high performers, might find it difficult to accept colleagues who are in the same rank in the organizational hierarchy as their mentors, which might harm their self-esteem. In support of this, research has found that mentors' supervisory status (supervisor vs. non-supervisor) has an influence on protégés' psychological support, career development and career satisfaction (Sosik & Godshalk, 2005). Therefore, it is reasonable to question whether employees have equal motivations to obtain career mentoring from colleagues by enhancing their relational competence. However, recent studies have shown that some demographic characteristics (e.g., age, education and organizational tenure) can also work as indicators of higher status (Li et al., 2019; Triana, Richard, & Yücel, 2017) so status-congruent mentorship (i.e., older, better educated and longer-tenure mentors) may have interaction patterns consistent with supervisor mentoring. Therefore, future research should extend our study to mentoring by senior colleagues to directly test the robustness of our findings.

Third, we have used a single dimension to measure supervisory mentors' expected benefits from mentoring a particular protégé in a pioneering study to examine this as a mediator. Prior studies have suggested that cost–benefit analysis of mentoring is multi-dimensional (e.g., Eby et al., 2006) when measuring the perceived benefits of mentoring in general, for example, 'mentoring makes one feel better about oneself' (Ragins & Scandura, 1999, p. 498). Future research will benefit from subdividing the expected benefits and costs into 10 factors (five for each), as Ragins and Scandura (1999) suggest, to investigate how different predictors differently influence the various cost and benefit factors. For example, deep-level similarity (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002) between the mentor and the protégé can reduce the costs of a dysfunctional relationship and increase the benefit of a loyal support base.

Last, the two samples in our empirical studies were both full-time Chinese employees, so cultural homogeneity may affect the generality of our findings. Because interpersonal harmony plays a key role in Chinese organizational culture, supervisors in Chinese culture always put emphasis on *guanxi* in their relationships with subordinates (Chen & Chen, 2004). In addition, employees and supervisors in China tend to have a higher level of power distance (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007), so supervisors may feel more alert to status challenges. In these contexts, high performers lacking perspective-taking are more likely to raise concerns among supervisory mentors, who will then be unwilling to mentor them. Therefore, it remains an open question whether the interplay in our results can be generalized to organizations with Western cultures. However, the downsides of high performance were first found in studies conducted in Western cultures (e.g., Khan et al., 2018), and even in Western organizations, researchers have shown that supervisors have much influence on their subordinates being promoted and their career development (Ivey & Dupré, 2020). These findings suggest that high performers in more competitive cultures with clear promotion standards may also need perspective-taking, but future research is needed to verify this.

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Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Xiaoyu (Christina) Wang: Conceptualization; Data curation; Funding acquisition; Writing – original draft. **Xiaotong Janey Zheng:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. **Yanjun Guan:** Conceptualization; Writing – review & editing. **Shuming Zhao:** Data curation; Writing – review & editing.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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