

# Effects of Protégé-mentor Gender Mix on Organisational Commitment

By David E. Okurame<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study examined the interaction effects of protégé and mentor gender on organisational commitment in the Nigerian work setting. Data was collected from one hundred and sixty-one dyads in four gender combinations through a survey of a large government owned health institution. Results revealed that mean scores of all-male, all-female, and the female protégé-male mentor dyads were comparable while that of male protégé-female mentor was significantly low. Whereas organisational commitment was better for male protégés when their mentors were males, it was better for females when mentors were females. The study narrows the gap created by the dearth of mentoring research in the Nigerian work setting and contributes an African perspective on gender effects of mentoring. Findings dismiss some hypotheses about gender and mentoring and underscore the fact that organisational commitment can be enhanced by gender dyads other than the all male combination. The implications of this for those who take decisions on grooming relationships for women were discussed.

*Keywords:* mentoring; protégé; mentor; gender; organisational commitment; Nigeria.

## Introduction

Organisational commitment is a three-dimensional construct which refers to identification with an employing organisation, the cost associated with leaving the organisation and feelings of obligation to remain with the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). It is an attitudinal variable that has persisted in empirical research due to its practical implications for employee turnover, absenteeism and work quality (Blau, 1986; Blau & Boal, 1989; Randall, 1990; Keller, 1997; Payne, 2006). Recent trends in modern organisations have made research in organisational commitment even more relevant. For instance, organisations are downsizing to survive stiff competition and meet stringent regulations for operation (Okurame, 2006). In the Nigerian work setting, this is clearly evident in the banking sector and many government owned organisations. These organisations expect employees that are retained to undertake increased routine workload, meet performance standards, and remain with the organisation for a reasonable period of time. However, the dearth of people with the right skills and the attendant stiff competition for the few that are available makes this difficult. The most obvious expression of the problem is found in the banking sector where employees move frequently from one bank to another in search of prospects for favourable career outcomes (Okurame, 2002). This constitutes a drain of resources and results in additional

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recruitment and training cost. Organisations are therefore interested in tackling the problem from all dimensions. For this reason, an empirical investigation of organisational commitment should be a source of concern to an organisational researcher wishing to proffer solutions and advance knowledge in this area.

One dimension to the problem that seems not to be the focal point of enquiries in Nigeria, and consequently lacks empirical attention, is mentoring. The literature suggests that, though under-utilised, mentoring is a fundamental factor which has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy for promoting organisational commitment (Appelbaum, Ritchie, & Shapiro, 1994). The social approach to the investigation of work attitude posits that the social context of work (which includes mentoring relationship with superiors or supervisors) has a significant impact on workers' attitude and behaviour (Wharton & Baron, 1991; Marks, 1994; DeVaney & Chen, 2003). Mentoring is especially valuable for the transmission of a positive attitude like organisational commitment because mentors provide invaluable information on the mission and philosophies of the organisation, help employees cope with career stress and give proper orientation towards workplace values (Murray, 1995; Gilley & Boughton, 1996; Payne, 2006). It ensures the transfer of skills which mentees can apply in diverse professional circumstances thereby ensuring career success, career growth, salary increases and promotions (Burke, Mckeen & McKenna, 1994; Okurame, 2002; Okurame & Balogun, 2005). When pay and promotional opportunities are satisfying, turnover decreases and organisational commitment increases (Jans, 1989; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). The variance theory posits that workers are satisfied to the extent that they get what they want from their work. Since mentoring fosters the vital ingredients of satisfaction, it serves as an effective tool for the socialization of positive attitudes such as organisational commitment (Stueart & Barbara, 1993; Johnson, Geroy & Griego, 1999).

The acclaimed benefits of mentoring and its importance for predicting organisational commitment creates a need to address likely hindrances to reaping the gains of the relationship. One of such obstacles which have attracted empirical attention is the gender combination of mentoring relationships. Women are a growing segment of the Nigerian workforce (Okurame, 2006) that is typified by a prevalence of males in management. This makes opposite sex mentoring inevitable and suggests that gender is an issue to be considered in any attempt to utilize mentoring in the country. The literature suggests that the gender composition of mentoring relationships affects its benefits and outcome. Empirical investigations (e.g. Ragins, 1989; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990) of mentoring benefits and outcomes, especially in the West, strongly demonstrate support for this position. However, most of these studies considered either the gender of the mentor or that of the protégé. Thus, the interaction effects of protégé and mentor gender is not sufficiently investigated. Relatively limited research also relates gender composition of mentoring to organisational commitment even more so among employees in the public sector. In the Nigerian work setting, empirical viewpoint on this issue is lacking due to the scanty research on mentoring, contributing to the near absence of African perspectives on mentoring in scholarly publications of professional journals. Given the limitations of literature, and the need to assess the extent to which findings on gender combinations of mentoring can be generalized in the Nigerian setting, this study examined the interaction effects of protégé-mentor gender on organisational commitment.

A number of studies conducted in the West give direction to the present investigation. A mentor has been defined as a high ranking, influential individual in a protégé's work environment (Ragins, 1989; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), and mentoring is an interpersonal relationship that thrives on networks of good relationships. Therefore, the findings that women are lacking at high levels and a dearth of network exist for the few that are available, reduces female influence (Noe, 1988; Ragins & Sunstrom, 1989; Ragins, 1989; Kirckmeyer, 1998). Again, the fact that female mentors face threats of being tagged 'feminist troublemaker' by female protégés (cited in Barker, Monks & Buckley, 1996) suggests possible hindrances to female mentors. Empirical investigations reveal that some men find it difficult to work under women while some women consider it problematic supervising men (Fairhurst, 1993; Williams & Locke, 1999).

Male and females are socialized along culturally suitable sex-roles that result in peculiar patterns of values and differences in acceptable behaviour for the sexes (Briles, 1987; Madden, 1987; Nagel & Hagen, 1983; Mould, 1980; Rosener, 1990; Boldy, Wood, & Kashy, 2001), and have implications for their reactions in a dyadic relationship (Payne & Cangemi, 1997). Burke, Mckeen, & McKenna (1994) observed that a male-female dyad easily develops into a close friendship that hinders mentoring experience unlike those involving the same sex. Even when a close relationship is absent, problems abound because male-female dyads are misconstrued as being sexual rather than professional (Ragins & Cotton, 1991). Females in cross-sex dyads experience social distance and discomfort (Kram, 1985). Given this knowledge, existing literature suggests that cross-sex compositions reduce the quality and benefits of mentoring (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990) and are beset with challenges that are absent in same-sex combinations (Clawson & Kram, 1984). Same-sex dyads therefore should obtain the greatest benefits from mentoring compared to cross-sex combinations. Since prior research indicates that an all-female dyad tends to be constrained (Ragins & Sunstrom, 1989; cited in Barker, Monks & Buckley, 1996; Kirckmeyer, 1998), it is expected that organisational commitment outcome of the all-female dyad will be less when compared to that in the all-male dyad. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated and tested.

Hypothesis 1: The highest level of organisational commitment would occur in the male protégé-male mentor gender combination compared to other gender dyads.

Hypothesis 2: The lowest level of organisational commitment would occur in the female protégé-female mentor gender combination compared to other gender dyads.

A mentoring relationship can be formal or informal. While informal mentoring develops spontaneously, formal mentoring relationships are formed through a planned matching of mentors and protégés by the organisation (Ragins & cotton, 1999). Traditionally, however mentoring relationships occur informally in organisations and benefit career more than formal mentoring (Klauss, 1981; Phillips-Jones, 1983; Chao, Walz & Gardner, 1992; Dreher & Cox, 1996). Though formal mentoring programs in the Nigerian work environment are not cited in literature, it is obvious that informal mentoring exists. This is because it is foremost an interpersonal relationship (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993) which develops naturally from shared admiration, aspiration, values and interests (Kram, 1983, 1985; Sullivan, 1992). This study, therefore, focused on informal

mentoring in the investigation of the effects of protégé-mentor gender mix on organisational commitment.

## **Method**

### *Design and setting*

The independent variables of the study are gender of mentor and gender of protégé while organisational commitment is the dependent variable. The independent variables are nominal variables that were dichotomised into male and female while the dependent variable was measured as a continuous variable. The study therefore utilised the factorial design to ascertain the interaction effects of protégé-mentor gender mix on organisational commitment.

The study was conducted among health care workers in a large government owned health institution that provides comprehensive inpatient and outpatient health care in South-western Nigeria.

### *Participants and procedure*

Data were obtained through a survey of 161 (64 males and 97 females) protégés engaged in informal mentoring relationship in their organisation. The average age (39.22 and 37.32), length of relationship (5.0 and 4.85) and organisational tenure (6.84 and 6.52) were comparable for male and female respondents. Their job status varied thus; 36 were senior house officers; 47 were residents; 5 were consultants; 13 were staff nurse; 29 were nursing sisters; 18 were senior nursing sisters; and 13 were matrons. All the participants were in the proximity of their mentors who were higher level members of staff. Ninety-two participants were under male mentors, while 69 were under female mentors. This yielded 101 (65.2%) same-gender dyads and 60 (34.8%) cross-gender relationships. A breakdown of informal mentoring dyads showed 48 male protégés with male mentors, 53 female protégés with female mentors, 16 male protégés with female mentors, and 44 female protégés with male mentors.

Participants were health care workers sampled through the purposive method in a large government owned health institution. The doctors were predominantly male while all but five nurses were females. They were approached, assured of confidentiality and invited to complete the self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered during office hours in outpatient and in-patient clinics of the health organisation. It took the researcher and two contact persons four weeks to collect data for the study. Of the 250 questionnaires administered, 161 (a response rate of 64.4%) had usable data.

### *Instrument*

The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire which tapped information on demographic, mentoring and organisational commitment variables. The demographic information on protégés includes age, sex, profession, job status, year of first medical or nursing certificate and organisation tenure while that on mentoring included informal mentoring status, physical proximity of mentor, mentors' gender and length of mentoring relationship. Organisational commitment was measured by a 9-item scale developed by Porter & Smith (1970). The measure was rated on a five-point likert

scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. High scores on the scale indicate a greater degree of organisational commitment.

## Results

The principal aim of this study was to examine the interaction effect of protégé and mentor gender on organisational commitment. Preliminary statistical analysis using the t-test revealed that male and female participants do not differ in age, length of informal mentoring relationship and tenure with their organisation ( $t = 1.543$ ,  $df (159)$ ,  $P > .05$ ,  $t = 0.375$ ,  $df (159)$ ,  $P > .05$  and  $t = 0.470$ ,  $df (159)$ ,  $p > .05$  respectively). This provides justification for collapsing data obtained from participants in the analysis. Profession (88 doctors and 73 nurses) and year of first medical or nursing qualification (professional tenure) are career stage indicators that affect organisational commitment (Lynn, Cao & Horn, 1996). These, and job status varied among participants. They were therefore selected as covariates to provide further basis for investigating the interaction effect of protégé and mentor gender on organisational commitment. The interaction effect of protégé and mentor's gender on organisational commitment was tested using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to enable the control of covariates that may confound findings. This analysis examined hypotheses 1 and 2.

**Table 1**  
**Analysis of covariance for interaction effects of protégé-mentor gender on organisational commitment**

| Source                      | SS         | df  | MS      | F         |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----|---------|-----------|
| Profession                  | 5.573      | 1   | 5.573   | 0.419     |
| Med. /nursing qualification | 6.664      | 1   | 6.664   | 0.501     |
| Job Status                  | 0.156      | 1   | 0.156   | 0.012     |
| Gender of protégé (GP)      | 46.469     | 1   | 46.469  | 3.492     |
| Gender of mentor (GM)       | 50.671     | 1   | 50.671  | 3.808     |
| GP x GM                     | 187.308    | 1   | 187.308 | 14.075*** |
| Error                       | 2049.425   | 154 | 13.308  |           |
| Total                       | 192084.000 | 161 |         |           |

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**  
**Scheffe's multiple comparisons for interaction effects of protégé-mentor gender on organisational commitment.**

| GENDER MIX                   | 1 | 2     | 3    | 4     | N  | M    | S.D. |
|------------------------------|---|-------|------|-------|----|------|------|
| Male protégé-male mentor     | - | 4.0** | 1.4  | 0.9   | 48 | 35.4 | 3.4  |
| Male protégé-female mentor   |   | -     | -2.6 | -3.1* | 16 | 31.4 | 4.2  |
| Female protégé-male mentor   |   |       | -    | -0.5  | 44 | 34.0 | 3.8  |
| Female protégé-female mentor |   |       |      | -     | 53 | 34.5 | 3.5  |

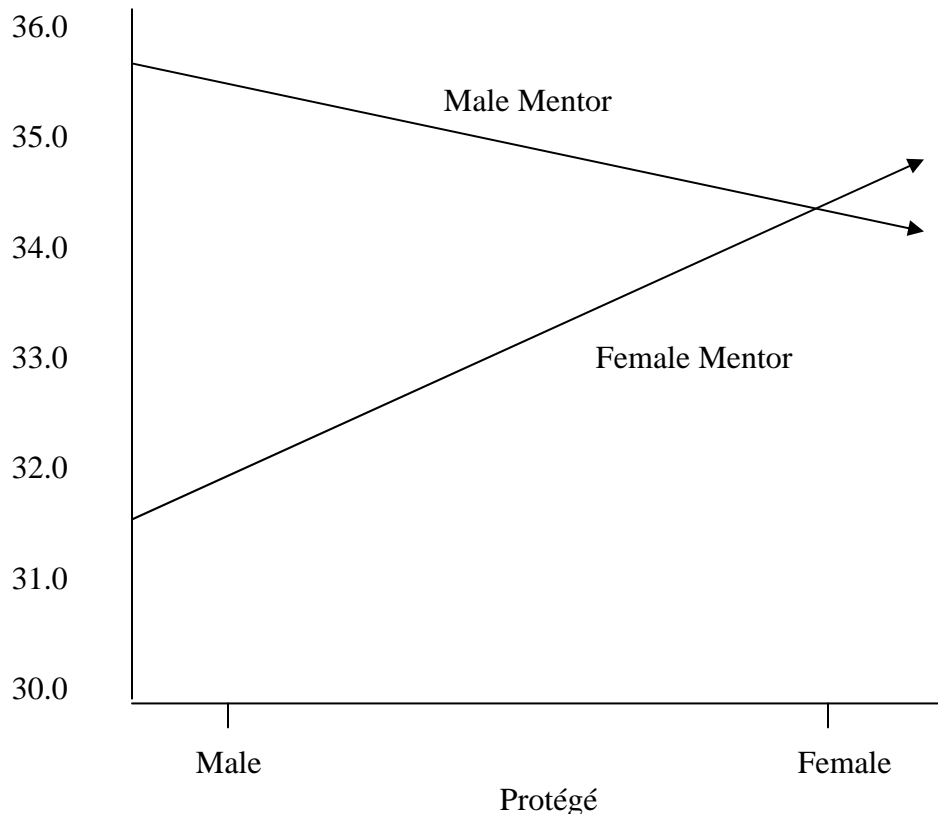
\* \*mean difference significant at 0.01

\* mean difference significant at 0.05

Results presented in Table 1 show that the control variables did not have significant effects on organisational commitment. The main effects of gender of protégé and that of mentor were also not significant,  $F (1, 154) = 3.492$ ,  $P > .05$ ,  $F (1, 154) =$

3.808,  $P > .05$  respectively. However, the results reveal a significant interaction effect of protégé and mentor's gender on organisational commitment,  $F(1, 154) = 14.075$ ,  $P < .001$ . This yielded four interaction cells. Mean scores of interacting cells presented in Table 2 indicate that organisational commitment is highest in the male protégé-male mentor dyad ( $M = 35.4$ ), followed by the female protégé-female mentor ( $M = 34.5$ ) gender combination, the female protégé-male mentor ( $M = 34.0$ ) dyads, and the male protégé-female mentor ( $M = 31.4$ ) dyad which recorded the lowest level. Further statistical analysis using the one way analysis of variance was carried out to test observed differences in the four gender combinations that resulted from the interaction. Results revealed significant differences,  $F(3, 157) = 4.879$ ,  $P < .01$  (results not presented in table), indicative of organisational commitment differences in the gender dyads. Post hoc analysis of mean scores to locate the difference was conducted with the scheffe multiple comparison method. Results presented in Table 2 revealed that the level of organisational commitment in the male protégé-female mentor dyad is significantly different from (a) the male protégé-male mentor dyad ( $p < 0.01$ ), and (b) the female protégé-female mentor ( $p < 0.05$ ). Comparisons of mean scores of all other dyads were not significant. This suggests that they are comparable. The source of the interaction effect of protégé and mentor's gender is therefore the significantly low organisational commitment mean score of the male protégé-female mentor dyad compared to other gender combinations.

Mean score on organisational commitment



**Figure 1: Interaction effects of protégé-mentor gender on organisational commitment.**

The pattern of the interaction effect of protégé and mentor gender in the present population is illustrated in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, organisational commitment is considerably better for male protégés when their mentors are males than when they are females. When protégés and mentors are females, organisational commitment is better than when protégés are females and mentors are males.

## **Discussion**

The primary aim of the present study is to investigate the interaction effect of the gender of protégé and that of the mentor on organisational commitment in the Nigerian work setting. Participants were comparable in age, organisational tenure and length of mentoring relationship. The controlled effects of the relevant covariates such as profession, year of first medical or nursing qualification and job status further justify the examination of organisational commitment within protégé-mentor gender mix. Results of ANCOVA revealed that the covariates were not significant. This implies that disparity in professional training, tenure and job status were not significant enough to result in organisational commitment differences. Results revealed non-significant main effects of gender of protégé and that of mentor but a significant interaction effect on organisational commitment. These findings suggest that gender of protégé or gender of mentor in isolation is not useful in revealing differences in organisational commitment. Alternatively, the non-significant main effect of protégé gender could be the outcome of a balance of organisational variables since these have been suggested (Aranya, Pollock & Amernic, 1981) as a source of differences in organisational commitment between the sexes. This argument seems valid in the present study given that job status (a covariate in this investigation) which reflects an organisational variable like promotions was not significant. The trend in the present population typifies findings of studies (e.g. Dreher & Ash, 1990; Ragins & Cotton, 1999) which found equal (no statistically significant differences) outcomes of mentoring for male and female protégés, and their mentor counterparts.

Importantly for the focus of this study, results of statistical analysis found a significant interaction effect of gender of protégé and gender of mentor on organisational commitment. The results of post hoc multiple comparisons analysis of mean scores revealed that though, male protégé-male mentor dyad had a slightly higher mean score, this was not statistically significant because the all female dyad and the female protégé-male mentor combination also recorded comparable levels of organisational commitment. These findings did not support Hypotheses 1 and 2, and dismiss some hypotheses about gender composition and mentoring outcome. Given that workplace norms buffer the favourable male power position in organisations and that all male dyads are not challenged by problems reported in cross-sex dyads (Clawson & Kram, 1984), it was expected that the all-male dyad would clearly be far ahead. Again, it is argued in the literature that female protégés do not get the desired understanding from female mentors (Williams & Locke, 1999) and that dyads involving females are characterized by competitive feelings and reluctance of female mentor to provide support - queen bee syndrome (as cited in Barker et al, 1996; O'Leary, 1988) which hinder successful mentoring. The all female dyad was therefore expected to register the least level of organisational commitment. Contrary to the expectations of both hypotheses, organisational commitment outcome of the all-male dyad was not clearly outstanding but

was comparable with even the female protégé-male mentor dyad while that in the all-female dyad was as good, and not the least. Instead, the male protégé-female mentor combination recorded the lowest level of organisational commitment. Mean scores generally show that same-sex combinations had higher levels of organisational commitment compared to cross-sex dyads.

The above findings give credence to previous findings (Burke et al., 1994; Ragins & Cotton, 1991; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Kram, 1985; Clawson & Kram, 1984) that the gender combination of mentoring relationships significantly affects mentoring outcomes. However, findings that mean scores of the all-male and all-female dyads, and the female protégé-male mentor relationship are not significantly different, particularly advances the literature by showing that organisational commitment can be enhanced by gender dyads other than the all male combination. It is consistent with the assertion (Halcomb, 1980; Hetherington & Barcelo, 1985; Ragins & Cotton, 1993) that women should acquire female mentor to obtain favourable mentoring benefits and outcome. It is also in line with the postulation of gender socialization theory which appears to make women more comfortable under the supervision of men. The implication of the present findings is that arguments against these dyads may not necessarily generalise to every relationship or setting.

Consistent with current findings that female mentors achieved outcomes comparable to that of male mentors with female protégés, recent events in Nigeria show that women are doing well in leadership positions and have turned things around in their organisations. For instance, remarkable feats have been recorded by the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and the Nigerian Stock Exchange under the leadership of women. While NAFDAC succeeded in checking the importation and local manufacture of fake and expired drugs (Okurame, 2004), the Nigerian Stock Exchange created an unprecedented capitalisation in stock and accomplished the listing of some Nigerian banks in the foreign stock exchange market. Therefore, findings that the male protégé-female mentor gender combination had the lowest level of organisational commitment may well parallel results that men are less comfortable working under the supervision of women (Fairhurst, 1993), and women are less willing to supervise men (Williams & Locke, 1999). A mentoring relationship involving a male protégé-female mentor dyad has considerable potential to embrace this gender role stereotype, and this could result in an under-reporting of opportunities and mentoring outcomes by male protégés of female mentors. This explanation is particularly tenable because people are influenced by their expectations in ways that make them 'see' what they expect to see (cited in Ehigie & Umoren, 2003), and the Nigerian society is such that gender role norms like this operate with an even greater strength. Alternatively, organisational commitment outcome of the male protégé-female mentor dyad may be low in actual terms due to the peculiarity of the gender combination. If this is the case, then female mentors with male protégés need to be supported for a more helpful relationship to occur.

The findings of this study have implications for policy formulation and training, especially for those who take decisions on growing relationships for women. It is obvious, therefore that the practical application of the findings requires an intervention that would be most effective if applied within the context of an organisational policy. An organisational policy could, for instance, encourage the development of gender dyads in the desired direction since mentoring affect organisational commitment, and gender

composition plays a crucial role. It could also enhance the fortune of the male protégé-female mentor dyad if there is a special reward policy that recognizes quality interaction and effective mentoring relationship in this group. This should work since reward has been found to encourage good mentoring (Hunt & Michael, 1983). The training of mentors and protégés is an essential ingredient of a successful mentoring relationship (Dancer, 2003). The findings of this study support the need to train more females in top management positions to mentor female protégés. Again, when organisations put up potential mentoring partners for training special attention also has to be paid to the male protégé-female mentor dyad. Following the explanation found in the literature for the significantly low level of organisational commitment in this dyad, training has to be programmed to pay adequate attention to stereotypes about this dyad.

The findings of the present study have contributed to the growing body of knowledge of the nature and extent of inequalities of outcomes of gender dyads. It extends knowledge about mentoring by examining a scarcely researched mentoring outcome, organisational commitment. It has narrowed the gap created by the dearth of mentoring research in the Nigerian work setting and the virtual absence of African perspective in the scholarly scope of reference journals. Another significant contribution of this study is in the application of findings. This will improve mentoring relationships, enhance their outcomes and make the possibility of organisational commitment predictable. However, the findings of this study should be viewed with caution because of a number of limitations.

The present study is exploratory; further investigations in the Nigerian environment are needed to confirm its findings. Besides, the study examined the effects of protégé-mentor gender mix on organisational commitment and does not imply that the variance is totally accounted for by gender of mentoring partners. Future studies should incorporate equally relevant variables and control for the level of mentoring function received by protégés. The study was conducted among a specialised group of professionals, and in a setting (health care organisation) that elicits and creates an environment to better express traditional feminine qualities such as interpersonal sensitivity and nurturing skills (Okurame, 2007). Results which contrast with some assumptions in the literature may well be the consequence of sample differences since the behaviour of professionals differs by organisational setting (Hall, 1968; Lachman & Aranya, 1986). This calls for studies in other sectors of the Nigerian work environment. Finally, the data obtained from participants were also self-reported. They are therefore subject to the usual limitations of a survey research of this nature. Future research may want to utilize much more concrete measures in the Nigerian setting. The foregoing limitations, however, do not erode the practical implication of results that organisational commitment could be predicted from the gender composition of an informal mentoring relationship.

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