

Antecedents and outcomes of career plateaus: The roles of mentoring others and proactive personality



Yu-Hsuan Wang^a, Changya Hu^{a,*}, Carrie S. Hurst^b, Chun-Chi Yang^c

^a National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan

^b Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN 37209, USA

^c Fu Jen Catholic University, New Taipei City, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Although mentoring others and career plateaus are both common experiences for seasoned employees, they are rarely examined together. In this study, we considered mentoring others as an antecedent of career plateaus and emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions as outcomes of career plateaus for mentors. We also examined the moderating role of mentors' proactive personality. Results of hierarchical regression analyses based on 188 mentoring dyads indicated that career-focused mentoring alleviated both hierarchical and job content plateauing perceptions. Mentors' proactive personality moderated the relationship between career-focused mentoring and hierarchical plateauing such that the negative relationship is stronger for low proactive personality mentors. Hierarchical plateaus were positively related to mentors' emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions whereas job content plateaus only positively related to turnover intentions. Proactive personality moderated the relationship between job content plateaus and mentors' work-related attitudes such that the positive relationships were stronger for more proactive mentors. The implications and future research suggestions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring others and career plateaus are important research topics for seasoned employees in the career management literature (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2010; Lentz & Allen, 2009). Mentoring literature suggests that mentors can benefit from mentorship by increasing job performance, developing leadership skills, and achieving higher career success (Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006; Bozionelos, 2004; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). On the other hand, the career plateau literature suggests that seasoned employees may experience career plateauing perceptions, which are associated with negative consequences for employees such as negative job attitudes and organizational outcomes (Elsass & Ralston, 1989; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). Surprisingly, there have been very few studies that examine the two constructs together from the perspective of mentors (Allen, 2007; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000).

Seasoned employees are valuable human resources in any organization because they have more experience and expertise and are critical agents for transferring and creating organizational knowledge (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). To better understand the work attitudes and behaviors of seasoned employees, researchers need to consider both positive and negative career experiences that these employees encounter. Furthermore, by examining the relationship between mentoring others and career plateauing perceptions of seasoned employees, researchers can provide insights for theoretical development in the careers literature and also allow for better design of human resources management practices to retain seasoned employees.

* Corresponding author.

Mentoring others is associated with leadership development activities and enlarging job scope, which can reduce perceptions of career progress uncertainty and job monotony (Elsass & Ralston, 1989; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). This suggests that mentoring others may alleviate the experience of career plateaus, which refers to low perceptions of future upward mobility or monotony in job responsibility (Fence, Stoner, & Warren, 1977; Greenhaus et al., 2010; Milliman, 1992). Since most mentoring studies focus on outcomes of junior employees (i.e., protégés) and most career plateau studies focus on the reactions of seasoned employees (i.e., mentors), research bridging the relationship between mentoring and career plateaus has mostly been conceptual discussion or a call for further research efforts (Chao, 1990; Elsass & Ralston, 1989; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). The few available studies that attempted to integrate mentoring others and career plateaus offer little empirical evidence on the direct relationships between these two constructs (Chao, 1990; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). Chao (1990) first suggested that mentoring may be a useful organizational intervention to lessen the perceptions of career plateau. However, her study did not empirically examine mentoring others as a predictor of career plateau perceptions. Rotondo and Perrewé (2000) further indicated that mentoring others is a coping response to career plateauing that might help plateaued employees to cognitively manipulate the meaning of being career-plateaued. They empirically examined this premise and measured mentoring others with one item, which asked plateaued individuals to indicate the extent to which they had engaged in mentoring others during their organizational tenure. As a result, mentoring others in their study may not properly reflect the effort individuals put into mentoring others, overlooks the role of mentoring others in other conditions such as formal mentoring, and does not distinguish the role of career mentoring and psychosocial mentoring in career plateauing. Lentz and Allen (2009) integrated mentoring others and career plateauing by considering provision of mentoring functions as moderators between career plateauing perceptions and job attitudes. However, they used self-reported data and only involved mentors of informal mentoring relationships. As a result, their study did not examine the direct relationship between mentoring others and career plateauing and excluded mentors of formal mentorship.

To advance the integration of mentoring others and career plateauing in the career literature, this study identifies potential antecedents, outcomes, and moderators of mentors' career plateauing. In contrast to Lentz and Allen's (2009) application of life stage theory, we take the perspective of conservation of resources (COR) theory in stress (Hobfoll, 1989) to suggest that mentoring others is a resource investment for mentors attempting to prevent a loss of resources that would directly lead to career plateauing perceptions. Thus, mentoring others negatively relates to career plateaus, which are positively associated with emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. Because certain personal characteristics are also critical resources (Hobfoll, 1989), we examine the moderating roles of proactive personality in the above relationships. The present study also includes mentor and protégé data among mentors engaged in both formal and informal mentoring relationships to examine the level of mentoring functions provided.

2. Mentoring functions as an antecedent that prevents career plateaus

Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory highlights the important role of resources to individuals such that people strive to obtain and protect resources. Resources are objects (e.g., equipment), conditions (e.g., position and supportive social network), or personal and energy resources that possess intrinsic or instrumental value (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory maintains that stress will occur in the workplace when employees' resources are lost or threatened with loss. The symbolic value of these resources helps employees define who they are (Hobfoll, 1989). Some resources identified by Hobfoll are particularly relevant to the workplace, such as feelings of success, goal accomplishment, challenge, seniority or status, leadership roles, advancement in training, understanding supervisors, and a sense of direction in life. Those resources are related to career advancement and job monotony, and when lost or threatened with loss, may lead to career plateauing perceptions.

Scholars distinguished two types of career plateaus. Hierarchical plateaus occur when the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is low (Feldman & Weitz, 1988; Fence et al., 1977). Job content plateaus refer to lack of challenge or responsibility and overall staleness of the job itself (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 1998; Allen, Russell, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999; Milliman, 1992). Employees who are not accomplishing career goals or lack status/seniority at work may believe their careers are stalling and experience hierarchical plateaus (Feldman & Weitz, 1988; Fence et al., 1977). Likewise, employees with unchallenging job tasks or boring routines may experience job content plateaus (Allen et al., 1998, 1999; Milliman, 1992). Taking the perspective of COR theory, the actual or expected resource loss associated with experiencing career plateaus is stressful and leads to actions to protect or regain resources through investment (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). Because mentoring others provides mentors the opportunities for career advancement and broadened job content, we argue that mentoring others is one type of investment that mentors can use to prevent career plateaus.

The mentoring relationship can be defined as an interpersonal exchange in the workplace between a junior and a senior employee, in which the senior employee (mentor) supports, guides, and orients the junior employee (protégé) to the various tasks, functions, and culture within the organization (Kram, 1983). Much of this research focuses on the benefits for protégés, but more recent research streams have turned to discuss the benefits for mentors (Allen, 2007). However, the potential role that mentoring others has in alleviating career plateauing has rarely been examined. Using self-reported data by mentors, Lentz and Allen (2009) tested the moderating role of mentoring others in the relationship between mentors' career plateau perceptions and their job attitudes, but none of the moderating effects were supported in their study.

From the perspective of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001), mentoring others is a resource investment that might prevent mentor employees' from experiencing career plateau perceptions, either by rejuvenating the mentor in order to restore resources that have been lost or by restoring a mentor's sense of identity that is affected when facing career stagnation. Mentoring others is associated with more positive attitudes and higher perceived performance among plateaued employees (Rotondo & Perrewé, 2000). It can also increase emotional attachment and mental energy, reinforce one's professional identity, and improve

job meaningfulness (Allen, 2007; Allen et al., 2006; Lentz & Allen, 2009). Based on the COR theory and the empirical studies, mentoring others may be helpful for mentors who have been unable to advance in their careers and/or whose jobs have become routine. Thus, mentoring others will be negatively related to mentors' career plateauing perceptions.

Hypothesis 1a. *Mentoring others relates negatively to mentors' perceptions of hierarchical plateaus.*

Hypothesis 1b. *Mentoring others relates negatively to mentors' perceptions of job content plateaus.*

3. Career plateaus and employee work-related attitudes

Career plateaus are associated with numerous negative consequences for employees, including lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Allen et al., 1998; Burke, 1989; Chao, 1990; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Tremblay, Roger, & Toulouse, 1995). Findings from the few studies that have empirically examined the relationship between career plateaus and stress are inconsistent (Allen et al., 1998; Hurst, Kungu, & Flott, 2012; McCleese, Eby, Scharlau, & Hoffman, 2007).

According to the COR theory, self-efficacy is a resource to help individuals manage workplace stressors (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Plateaued employees, who perceive their career situations of becoming "stuck" at a level below their desired goal, may lose the self-efficacy and experience strain. Hierarchical plateaus may injure employees' work self-efficacy and lead to resource loss because of employees' failure to achieve promotions, especially when they expect and desire the promotion. Job content plateaus can lead to boredom, which should also lead to resource loss because job boredom leads to dissatisfaction, distress, and inattention (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2013). Over time, failure to restore those resources might result in work-related strain, such as burnout (Burke, 1989). Emotional exhaustion is considered to be the stress dimension of burnout, developing after exposure to work stressors over time (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). Plateaus might also lead to feelings of uncertainty about one's career and burnout is a common response to ambiguity and uncertainty (Beehr, 1998; Elsass & Ralston, 1989; Paulsen et al., 2005). On the other hand, employees who have never been promoted or had challenging roles can still be aware of the fact that others are getting promoted and assigned more difficult responsibilities and, to the extent that career progress is important to them, would also recognize this as a resource loss in terms of achieving that progress.

Another way employees might respond to the resource loss of experiencing plateaus is by withdrawing from the organization (Allen et al., 1998; Jung & Tak, 2008; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Tremblay et al., 1995). Hierarchically plateaued employees who perceive low upward mobility in their organizations may seek employment in another organization in order to pursue resources related to promotion or career advancement. Likewise, job content plateaued employees might consider leaving if they are unable to increase challenge in their jobs or restore this resource through other means. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2a. *Hierarchical plateaus relate positively to mentors' emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions.*

Hypothesis 2b. *Job content plateaus relate positively to mentors' emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions.*

4. Mentors' proactive personality as a moderator

As we suggest, mentoring is a resource investment that can prevent career plateaus. We identify proactive personality, which is a form of personal resource, as a moderator in the relationships between mentoring others, mentors' career plateauing perceptions, and mentors' work attitudes. Bateman and Crant (1993) indicate that a proactive individual is "one who is relatively unconstrained by situational forces, and who effects environmental change (p. 103)." In the other words, proactive individuals explore opportunities, demonstrate initiative, take action, and persevere until they reach closure by bringing about change (Harvey, Blouin, & Stout, 2006). Proactive employees tend to identify opportunities to change things at work and to act on those impulses (Crant, 2000). From the COR perspective, proactive individuals possess a higher level of personal resources, and those who have more personal resources not only attract more social resources but also engage in more instrumental and effective coping responses (Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990).

Mentoring others benefits mentors because they will take more responsibility and be respected by junior employees. It especially benefits low proactive mentors, who are more constrained by their circumstances and receive fewer opportunities for career advancement or job enrichment. Given that low proactive mentors have less personal and social resources, they have few alternatives for preventing career plateaus. As a result, mentoring others might be the means upon which they rely most heavily in managing their careers. Conversely, proactive employees can find growth opportunities by themselves and also actively pursue changes that are favorable to self-development (Harvey et al., 2006). Because proactive employees tend to take initiative in managing their career, engaging in many activities to change their status quo or work environment, they may use many different approaches to limit the threat of bottleneck or boredom that induces hierarchical and job content plateauing perceptions (Parker & Sprigg, 1999). The effect of engaging in a mentorship would not be the only effective coping strategy for proactive employees. Thus, the relationship between mentoring others and career plateaus would be weaker among mentors high in proactive personality and the relationship between mentoring others and plateaus would be stronger for low proactive mentors.

Hypothesis 3a. *Mentors' proactive personality buffers the relationship between mentoring others and hierarchical plateaus. When mentors' proactive personality is high, the above relationships will be weaker.*

Hypothesis 3b. *Mentors' proactive personality buffers the relationship between mentoring others and job content plateaus. When mentors' proactive personality is high, the above relationships will be weaker.*

Proactive personality may also moderate the relationship between career plateaus and employee outcomes. The stress literature suggests that personal characteristics play a critical role in the strains experienced from resource loss. Specifically, personality traits may moderate the stressor–strain relationship (Beehr, 1998; Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Parker & Sprigg, 1999; Parkes, 1994).

According to COR theory, individuals rely on personal resource reserves, such as personality, when experiencing workplace stressors (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). Workplace stress may pose a particular problem to proactive people because they are more goal-directed and steadfast in attempting to overcome problems in their environment. Anything interrupting their attempts may be a source of frustration leading to strain (Crant, 2000). For instance, Harvey et al. (2006) found that having a proactive personality exacerbated the relationship between conflict in the workplace and psychological burnout. Furthermore, Parker and Sprigg (1999) have examined the buffering effect of proactive personality on the demand–strain relationship and found that proactive employees facing high job demands were found to report less job strain and higher job efficacy. Mentors who have a proactive personality might experience more strain when they pursue goal-directed solutions but have no opportunity to change the state of being plateaued in their careers. Accordingly, we propose an exacerbating effect on the relationships between hierarchical and job content plateauing perceptions and mentors' emotional exhaustion. Since proactive individuals constantly explore options to improve their situations, they are also more likely to consider job changing as a way to improve their current status. Therefore, the relationship between career plateaus and turnover intentions may be stronger for proactive mentors experiencing plateaus.

Hypothesis 4a. *Mentors' proactive personality exacerbates the relationship between mentors' hierarchical plateaus and mentor work-related attitudes (emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions) such that the above relationships will be stronger when proactive personality is high.*

Hypothesis 4b. *Mentors' proactive personality exacerbates the relationship between mentors' job content plateaus and mentor work-related attitudes (emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions) such that the above relationships will be stronger when proactive personality is high.*

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

Data were collected from employees in the banking industry in Taiwan. Executive MBA and continuing education students in a private university in Northern Taiwan were contacted to provide a list of potential participants. Research assistants trained in data collection procedures contacted potential participants and explained the purpose of the project. Only those who were currently involved in an ongoing mentoring relationship within the same organization were eligible for participation. We distributed survey packages that contained a mentor questionnaire set and a protégé questionnaire set. We instructed each participant to complete only one set (e.g., the protégé set) and to distribute the other set to the other individual of the mentoring pair (e.g., the mentor set). We instructed potential candidates not to participate again if they had already completed one of the survey forms (mentor or protégé). The questionnaires were completed anonymously and mailed directly to the researchers with the enclosed return envelope.

We distributed 340 questionnaire packages, and 229 protégés and 225 mentors returned the completed forms. After excluding returned surveys that had missing data or those for which we were unable to match successfully, the number of dyads for analyses totaled 188. A total of 140 mentoring relationships (70%) were formally assigned by the organization and the average length of the mentoring relationship with the mentor was 1.45 years ($SD = 1.32$). Most participants (66%) were between the ages of 26 and 35 and women (62%). Forty-five percent of the mentors were between the ages of 26 and 35 and 46% of the mentors were between 36 and 45 years old. Most (63%) mentors were women with tenure between 4 and 10 years (41%).

5.2. Measures

Because traditional Chinese was the native language for all respondents, we translated items from well-developed scales in English into traditional Chinese using the back-translation approach. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), except for demographic variables.

5.2.1. Mentoring functions

Protégé participants indicated the extent of mentoring functions they received from their mentors by responding to the Mentoring Functions Questionnaire (MFQ) because it has been shown to be conceptually equivalent across the U.S. and Taiwan (Hu, Pellegrini, & Scandura, 2011). The original MFQ was 9-item scale. We only measured career functions and psychosocial functions in this study. Each of the two mentoring functions was measured by three items: career (e.g., "My mentor helps me coordinate professional goals"), and psychosocial (e.g., "I share personal problems with my mentor"). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were both .86 for career mentoring and psychosocial mentoring.

5.2.2. Mentors' perceived career plateau

Mentor participants responded to a shortened version of the career plateau scale developed by Milliman (1992). We selected three high-loading items from the original six-item scale for of each type of career plateau based on the study by Allen et al. (1999). An example item of hierarchical plateauing is, "The likelihood that I will get ahead is limited," and an example item of job content plateauing is, "I am challenged by my job (revised-coded)." The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .78 for hierarchical plateauing and .74 for job content plateauing.

5.2.3. Emotional exhaustion

We measured mentors' emotional exhaustion with the five-item emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach burnout inventory-general survey (Schaufeli et al., 1996). An example item is, "I feel emotionally drained from my work." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .92.

5.2.4. Turnover intentions

Three items developed by Keller (1984) were used to measure mentors' intentions to leave the organization (e.g., "I expect to change my job in the next few months"). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .86.

5.2.5. Proactive personality

Mentors responded to the six-item version of the proactive personality scale, which is shortened by Parker (1998) from the original 17 items (Bateman & Crant, 1993). An example item is, "I am always looking for better ways to do things." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .71.

5.2.6. Demographic and control variables

Because organizational tenure correlates to career plateauing (Allen et al., 1999) and demographic characteristics of the mentoring relationship often relate to mentoring functions (Jung & Tak, 2008; Lentz & Allen, 2009), we control the following variables in our hypothesis testing using regression analyses: the length of the mentoring relationship, the formality of the mentoring relationship, the mentor's age, sex, and tenure in the current organization, and the protégé's age and sex.

6. Results

Before testing the proposed hypotheses, we examined construct validity using the structural equation modeling approach. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of a 7-factor model (mentors' proactive personality, hierarchical plateau, job content plateau, emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions, career functions, and psychosocial functions). Although the chi-square of the model was significant ($\chi^2_{(278)} = 441.18, p < .01$), practical fit indices were acceptable (NNFI = .94, CFI = .95, PGFI = .75, SRMR = .07, RMSEA = .05) (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). All items had significant factor loadings ($p < .01$) and therefore provided support for the convergent validity of the measurement model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). We examined the discriminant validity by inspecting the confidence interval of each pair of constructs. The absolute values of the upper points of the confidence intervals ranged from (.14 to .78) and provided support for discriminant validity of the measurement model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and zero-order correlations for the study variables.

We used hierarchical regression to test the hypotheses. To prevent the problem of collinearity, all predictor variables were centered in the hierarchical regression analyses and centered predictors were used to produce the product terms for testing moderating effects (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Table 2 summarizes the results of regression analyses for Hypothesis 1a and 1b. Hypothesis 1a was partially supported because only career mentoring negatively related to hierarchical plateaus ($\beta = -.25, p < .01$), but not

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Mentor sex ^a	1.65	.48	–										
2. Mentor tenure	3.39	1.61	.00	–									
3. Mentoring type ^a	1.31	.46	–.12	–.03	–								
4. Length of mentorship	1.46	1.34	–.07	.00	.05	–							
5. Career mentoring	3.71	.60	–.06	–.10	–.03	–.14	(.84)						
6. Psychosocial mentoring	3.61	.68	.06	–.03	–.04	.03	.47**	(.82)					
7. Proactive personality	3.70	.40	–.15*	.01	.12	.11	.20**	.10	(.72)				
8. Hierarchical plateau	2.89	.72	–.06	.04	–.02	.10	–.19*	.02	–.02	(.76)			
9. Job content plateau	2.12	.51	–.10	.17*	.01	.00	–.25**	–.19*	–.36**	.26**	(.75)		
10. Emotional exhaustion	2.97	.88	–.03	–.17*	–.01	.23**	–.15*	–.06	–.02	.38*	.13	(.92)	
11. Turnover intention	2.46	.88	–.20**	–.12	.09	.06	–.04	–.06	.02	.42**	.34**	.54**	(.86)

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; † $p < .10$ (two-tailed); $N = 188$; mentor age (1 = less than 25, 2 = 26 to less than 35, 3 = 35 to less than 45, 4 = 45 to less than 55, 5 = above 55); tenure in the current organization (1 = less than 2 years, 2 = 2 years to less than 4 years, 3 = 4 years to less than 6 years; 4 = 6 years to less than 10 years, 5 = 10 years to less than 15 years, 6 = more than 15 years).

Internal consistency coefficients are shown in the parentheses on the diagonal of the correlation matrix.

^a Dummy-coded variables: male = 1; female = 2; formal mentorship = 1; informal mentorship = 2.

Table 2

Results of hierarchical regression on mentors' hierarchical and job content plateau perceptions.

	Hierarchical plateau	Job content plateau
Control variables		
Mentor sex ^a	-.06	-.10
Mentor tenure	.04	.17*
Mentoring type ^a	-.04	.01
Length of mentorship	.10	-.01
R ² (ΔR^2)	.02 (.02)	.04 (.04)
F	.71	1.84
Antecedents		
Career mentoring (CM)	-.25**	-.21*
Psychosocial mentoring (PM)	.14	-.07
R ² (ΔR^2)	.06 (.04**)	.10 (.06**)
F	1.99	3.42**
Moderation		
Mentor proactive personality (MPP)	.00	-.37**
CM \times MPP	-.03	.16*
PM \times MPP	-.02	-.07
R ² (ΔR^2)	.06 (.00)	.23 (.13**)
F	1.35	6.00**

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.^a Dummy-coded variable.

psychosocial mentoring ($\beta = .14, p = .08$). **Hypothesis 1b** was also partially supported because only career mentoring negatively related to job content plateaus ($\beta = -.21, p < .05$), but not psychosocial ($\beta = -.07, p = .36$). **Table 3** summarizes the results of regression analyses for **Hypotheses 2a and 2b**. **Hypothesis 2a** was supported as mentors' hierarchical plateaus were positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .35, p < .01$) and turnover intentions ($\beta = .37, p < .01$). **Hypothesis 2b** received partial support as job content plateaus were only negatively related to turnover intentions ($\beta = .28, p < .01$), but not emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .08, p = .26$). As shown in **Table 2**, **Hypothesis 3a** was not supported since mentors' proactive personality failed to moderate the relationship between mentoring others and hierarchical plateaus (career: $\beta = -.03, p = .74$; psychological: $\beta = -.02, p = .79$). **Hypothesis 3b** received partial support as proactive personality only moderated the relationship between career mentoring and job content plateaus (career: $\beta = .16, p < .05$; psychological: $\beta = -.07, p = .34$). **Figs. 1 and 2** present the moderating effects using the plotting procedures suggested by **Cohen and Cohen (1983)**. As indicated by **Fig. 1**, the negative relationship between career mentoring and job content plateaus was stronger for low proactive mentors. We found that the simple slope was significant for low proactive mentors ($\beta = -.14, p < .01$), but not for high proactive mentors ($\beta = -.04, p = .40$) and the simple slope difference was significant ($\Delta\beta = .10, p < .05$). As shown in **Table 3**, **Hypothesis 4a** was not supported because proactive personality did not moderate the relationship between mentor's hierarchical plateaus and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.02, p = .79$) or turnover intentions ($\beta = .01, p = .83$). **Hypothesis 4b** was supported since mentors' proactive personality moderated the relationships between job content plateaus and

Table 3

Results of hierarchical regression on mentors' emotional exhaustion and intentions to quit.

	Emotional exhaustion	Intentions to quit
Control variables		
Mentor sex ^a	-.03	-.19*
Mentor tenure	-.19**	-.12
Mentoring type ^a	-.04	.06
Length of mentorship	.21**	.04
Career mentoring (CM)	-.14	-.04
Psychosocial mentoring (PM)	-.01	-.04
R ² (ΔR^2)	.10 (.10**)	.06 (.06)
F	3.36**	1.97
Antecedents		
Hierarchical plateau (HP)	.35**	.37**
Job content plateau (JCP)	.08	.28**
R ² (ΔR^2)	.23 (.13**)	.30 (.24**)
F	6.55**	9.60**
Moderation		
Mentor proactive personality (MPP)	.02	.11
HP \times MPP	-.02	.01
JCP \times MPP	.16*	.13*
R ² (ΔR^2)	.25 (.02)	.33 (.03 [†])
F	5.33**	7.75**

Note: [†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.^a Dummy-coded variable.

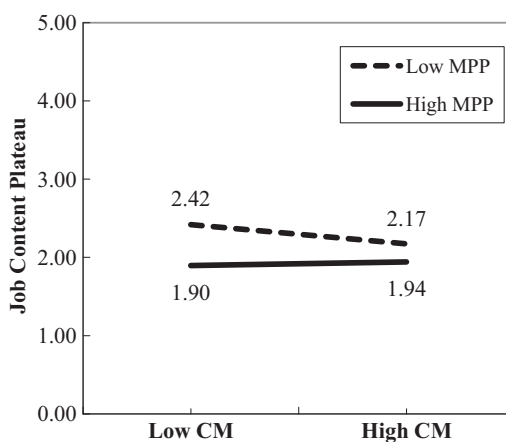


Fig. 1. The moderating effect of mentors' proactive personality on the relationship between mentors' provision of career mentoring and job content plateau. Note: CM, mentors' provision of career mentoring to protégés; MPP, mentors' proactive personality.

emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .16, p < .05$) and turnover intentions ($\beta = .13, p < .05$). As shown in Figs. 2 and 3, the positive relationship between the perceptions of job content plateaus and mentor work-related attitudes (emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions) are stronger for high proactive mentors. The simple slope was significant for high proactive mentors ($\beta = .28, p < .01$), but not low proactive mentors ($\beta = -.01, p = .95$) when predicting emotional exhaustion. The simple slope difference was significant ($\Delta\beta = .29, p < .01$). When predicting turnover intentions, the simple slope was significant for both low proactive mentors ($\beta = .25, p < .01$) and high proactive mentors ($\beta = .47, p < .01$) and the simple slope difference was significant ($\Delta\beta = .22, p < .01$).

7. Discussion

The aim of our study was to examine the relationships between mentoring others, career plateauing, and work-related attitudes of seasoned mentors. Our findings support that mentoring others by offering career support, but not psychosocial support, may alleviate mentors' career plateauing perceptions. Consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001), provision of career support is an investment of resources that enables mentors to gain a deeper understanding of work-related knowledge. These learning experiences not only reduce mentors' boredom but also help them constructively reflect on their career management progress (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Thus, mentoring others in career functions is a resource investment that enables mentors to restore valuable resources. The finding that psychosocial support was not related to career plateauing could be based on two possible reasons. First, psychosocial mentoring (acceptance-and-confirmation, counseling, and friendship) may not be directly related to career development activities or job design. Second, we collected our data in Taiwan, which has a cultural context that emphasizes interpersonal relationships, groups, and hospitality (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In such a context, some elements of psychological functions, such as providing counseling when junior employees ask for help, are also expected of seasoned employees. Thus, the provision of psychological functions is not a novel job content for mentors, and will not lessen their career plateauing perceptions. These

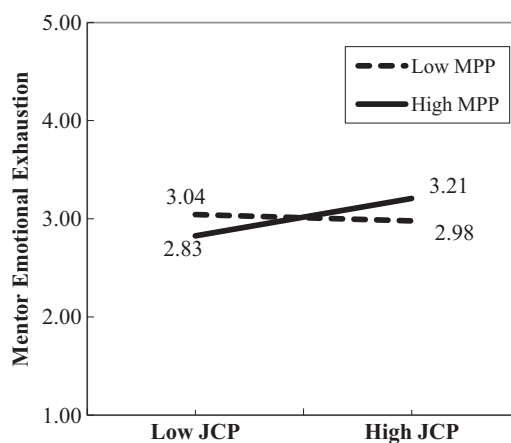


Fig. 2. The moderating effect of mentors' proactive personality on the relationship between mentors' job content plateau and emotional exhaustion. Note: JCP, mentors' job content plateau; MPP, mentors' proactive personality.

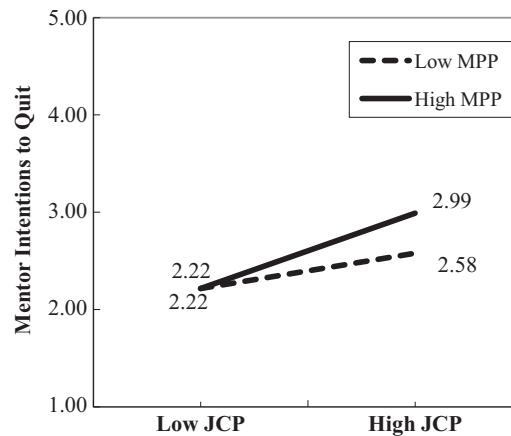


Fig. 3. The moderating effect of mentors' proactive personality on the relationship between mentors' job content plateau and turnover intentions. Note: JCP, mentors' job content plateau; MPP, mentors' proactive personality.

findings highlight the value of examining the benefits of mentoring others from the mentor's perspective because mentoring others enables mentors to better manage their careers.

We found that only hierarchical plateaus were positively related to mentors' emotional exhaustion, which is consistent with previous research (Allen et al., 1998; Hurst et al., 2012). However, similar to the findings reported by Lentz and Allen (2009), both hierarchical and job content plateaus increased turnover intentions. Taken together, these findings provide further support that career plateaus are important predictors of work-related attitudes and that hierarchical plateaus may be especially critical to the work-related attitudes of seasoned employees.

The finding that mentors' proactive personality moderates the relationship between mentoring functions and career plateaus as well as the relationship between career plateaus and work-related attitudes highlights the importance of personality in the career management process. Unlike high proactive mentors, who tend to have more resources and actively engage in activities that can help them better manage their careers, low proactive mentors rely more on mentoring others to reduce plateaus. Specifically, the provision of mentoring appears to be most successful in reducing job content plateaus when mentors are low in proactive personality. Researchers have identified a wide range of potential strategies for coping with plateaus (McCleese et al., 2007) but employees low in proactive personality may be less likely to perceive or pursue a variety of strategies to manage their careers and mentoring might be the only strategy they pursue. On the other hand, high proactive personality mentors may have attempted or at least perceived the option of additional strategies for improving their career situations, thus reducing the strain of job content plateaus. This is consistent with Parker and Sprigg's (1999) finding that proactive personality helped buffer the strain of job demands. The finding that proactive personality did not moderate the relationships between mentoring and hierarchical plateaus is consistent with observations that this career situation may be universally perceived as unavoidable (Bardwick, 1986; Hurst et al., 2012; Lentz & Allen, 2009).

The findings also suggest that mentors' proactive personality accentuates the positive effects of career plateaus on emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions when experiencing job content plateaus but not hierarchical plateaus. Hierarchical plateaus usually result when an individual's vertical movement within an organization declines (Allen et al., 1998, 1999; Milliman, 1992) and are considered to be a common phenomenon of stable organizational structures (Lentz & Allen, 2009). However, because job content plateaus result from a lack of challenging work or decrease in responsibilities (Allen et al., 1998, 1999; Milliman, 1992), proactive mentors might become more frustrated when job content plateaus occur in the organization, leading to poorer work attitudes. These findings also confirmed that, in some cases, proactive personality actually accentuates, rather than buffers, the stressor-strain relationship (Harvey et al., 2006). Our finding that the negative consequences of plateaus are stronger for hierarchically plateaued mentors than for job content plateaued mentors is reasonable because proactive individuals are more likely to take initiatives in changing the work conditions, even by moving to another organization. However, the mixed findings in the literature calls for future research to consider the important distinction between the two types of career plateau constructs.

7.1. Limitations and future research directions

Several research limitations should be noted. First, even though the mentoring functions provided were reported by protégés in an attempt to prevent common source variance, there were some variables that relied on self-reported data. And although self-reported data were appropriate for most variables, future research should ideally examine these constructs from additional sources such as objective data. Second, the cross-sectional nature of our study may lead to questions regarding the causal order of the studied variables. It is possible that employees who experience a lower level of career plateau perceptions are more likely to mentor others. However, treating mentoring functions as a predictor of career plateaus is consistent with studies that examine career-related antecedents of career plateaus (Allen et al., 1998, 1999; Chao, 1990; Lentz & Allen, 2009). Furthermore, our research model is based on the COR

perspective, which argues that resource investment (mentoring others) may be a preventive action when individuals consider there may be a potential threat to resource loss (career plateauing) in the future. Previous researchers have noted the difficulty of examining coping strategies in the plateau-stress process, since they can occur before, during, or after an individual experiences stress (e.g., Hurst et al., 2012; McCleese et al., 2007). Therefore, we encourage future longitudinal studies to more easily examine the study variables across time. Third, we chose only career and psychosocial mentoring functions as predictors of career plateaus to echo Lentz and Allen's (2009) work. These two active forms of mentoring are more in line with the idea of resource investment from mentors. However, the unique effect of role modeling may need further research attention.

Researchers have recognized the potential importance of individual differences in stressor-strain relationships for some time (Beehr, 1998), but the present study is the first to examine proactive personality as a moderator of the relationships between mentoring, career plateaus, and work attitudes. Other individual difference variables may also serve to buffer or accentuate the relationships observed in the present study. For example, a similar pattern of results might be expected for individuals who are high in conscientiousness because conscientious employees tend to be self-disciplined and strive for competence and achievement (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Mentors who are low in conscientiousness might be less dutiful in pursuing strategies for coping with their plateaus and experience less career mobility. Researchers should continue to consider the potential role of individual differences in the relationships between mentoring, career plateaus, and employee outcomes.

8. Conclusion

This study is among the first attempts to bridge mentoring and career plateauing research. The findings support that mentoring others is negatively associated with career plateauing perceptions, which are positively related to emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. With awareness of the limitations of this study, the results indicate that mentoring others can alleviate career plateauing perceptions and the consequences of career plateauing, especially for mentors with low proactive personality. Furthermore, to avoid turnover of proactive successful mentors, managers may need to invest more attention and intervention among high proactive personality mentors when they face career plateaus.

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