The Role of Mentoring in the Prediction of Strategic Independence

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This study focuses on positive dispositional traits and mentoring in the study of strategic independence among young adults. Strategic independence is a composite trait comprised used to assess a person's propensity to make and persevere with long-term plans. Using hierarchical regression analysis on survey data collected from 324 young adults in the United States, we found that effective mentoring relationships have a positive influence on the level of strategic independence among mentees. Implications for theory and practice, limitations, and future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The stereotype of today's young adults is that they are overly self-absorbed and believe they know more and are capable of more than their actual abilities indicate (Henderson, 2014). They are frequently perceived as being permanently affixed to their phones and oversharing on social media (BestLife, 2019). Additionally, the popular perception is that young people are unwilling to transition from being dependent on their parents into fully independent adulthood. Academic studies have found young adults often feel they are entitled to rewards (Miller & Konopaske, 2014). The media often exaggerates and reinforces these negative traits. While it is easy to focus on the negative behaviors of this generation, there are complex reasons for their attitudes and actions, particularly when it comes to their economic motivations and orientations. We explore some of these below.

There are quite a few major economic and societal influences that are contributing to young adults' delayed transition to adulthood. Today's young adults are in a transitionary period between the Millennial Generation (also called Gen Y) and Generation Z. Whereas Millennials grew up with the prevalence of the Internet, the Gen Zs have used mobile devises to engage in social media, such as SnapChat and Instagram, and on-demand entertainment, such as Netflix and YouTube, for most of their formative years. However, there is not a universally agreed upon beginning and ending date. Typically the Millennials are considered to be born sometime from the late 1970s to early 1980s through the late 1990s to early 2000s. Generation Z were born sometime between the late 1990s to early 2000s (Dimock, 2019).

Today's young adults are the best educated generation ever. In fact, Gen Zs are replacing Millennial as the most educated generation in the United States. Although too soon to say for sure what the college

graduation rate will be, Gen Zs have the lowest high school dropout rate of any generation (Fry & Parker, 2018). However, this generational cohort has the greatest percentage of members delaying entry into the job market, with only 58% of 18-21 year olds working full-time in 2018, compared to 72% of early Millennials of the same age in 2002 (Pew Research Center, 2018). Even with more education, the condition of underemployment, defined as college graduates working in jobs that do not require a college degree, is another challenge facing young adults. The underemployment rate for recent college graduates is climbing, with reported rates at 44% (Abel et al., 2014). Additionally, there is a decline in the quality of jobs held by recent college graduates as many of these individuals increasingly accept low-wage or part-time jobs (Abel et al., 2014). Also, over one-third of Americans do not plan to retire until after the age of 65, compared to 14% stating they planned to work beyond age 65 twenty years earlier (Riffkin, 2015). This underemployment is leading to young adults' increased financial dependence on parents or immediate families (Gabor, 2014). One result of this that recent college graduates often return to the homes of parents or other family members until they can obtain adequate employment and sustainable financial independence (Davidson, 2014). Given that unemployment rates due to the currently growing COVID-19 pandemic are rapidly approaching the levels of the Great Depression, it seems highly likely that today's young adults will continue to remain with their parents for a lengthy period of time (Carlson, 2020).

In general, this research extends prior studies by examining whether there is a relationship between young adults' abilities to make and carry out long-term plans and mentoring the mentoring they receive. We wish to explore whether faculty can provide guidance and counseling to improve the abilities of students in this area. It is important to better understand this propensity so that university faculty can better prepare our current students to launch gainful careers to develop into future leaders.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES

Strategic Independence

One area within the personality research domain that could benefit from additional research as it impacts today's young adults is what influences strategic independence. We define strategic independence as one's propensity to make and adhere to plans in order to achieve long-term goals Kirby et al., 2016). Studying this trait is important because Gen Z are increasingly experiencing a taking longer to explore their identities (Mechler & Bourke, 2011), which is thought to contribute to the delay of reaching such hallmarks of adulthood as starting families, finishing college, obtaining financial independence, and launching careers (Arnett, 2007). This phenomenon, coupled with record levels of unemployment and underemployment, encourages us to develop our understanding of the issues surrounding young adults' dispositions to be enterprising and persistent. Strategic independence is a composite of two traits: achievement-striving and planfulness.

Achievement-striving has been defined as having high levels of purposefulness and aspiration, a willingness to work hard to achieve goals, and a strong sense of direction in life (Costa & McCrae, 1992). People high in achievement-striving set high goals for themselves and tend to persist in those goals (Marinova et al., 2013). Achievement-striving relates positively to supervisors' evaluations of the managerial potential of employees (Thomason et al., 2011) and predicted leadership emergence among employees (Marinova et al., 2013).

Planfulness is the second dimension of strategic independence. It assesses an individual's need for achievement in structured situations such as college. It captures the degree to which an individual is organized, efficient, foresighted, productive, thorough, persevering, and seen by others as capable and reliable (Gough, 1995).

Mentoring

Mentoring has drawn a considerable amount of interest from both researchers and practitioners. Much of the academic interest began with Kram's (1985) seminal work, which introduced the dimensions of career and psychosocial mentoring. Subsequently, there has been a substantial amount of research

investigating its myriad behavioral, attitudinal, motivational, and relational outcomes (cf., O'Brien et al., 2010). Although several definitions of mentoring have been identified in the literature (Crisp & Cruz, 2009), there is general agreement that mentoring is the process by which a more experienced individual (a mentor) provides psychosocial and career-related support to a less experienced individual (the protégé) with the goal of enhancing the protégé's personal and professional development (Kram, 1985). Research typically indicates that mentoring promotes positive employee outcomes such as work and career attitudes, and specific outcomes like higher pay and more promotions for protégés (Allen et al., 2008).

Young adults often seek out and receive academic and career-oriented mentoring while in college. Sources of such mentoring may include university faculty, staff, and their fellow students (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Mentors in college are able to counsel protégés on ways to achieve academic success as well as help with opportunities to build career-related skills and experiences (Eby et al., 2008).

Research also suggests that mentoring in a college environment can help students to engage in planning that is related to college-career transitions (cf., Crisp & Cruz, 2009). For example, Renn and colleagues (2014) reported that mentor career support positively predicted college student career planning and job search intentions. When applied to the current study, it is likely that effective mentoring by faculty, student club advisors, and career services advisors will exert a positive influence on young adults' transitions to full adult independence. Taken together, we propose:

Hypothesis: *Effective mentoring will be positively related to strategic independence in young adults, ceteris paribus.*

METHODS

Sample and Procedures

A cross-sectional research design was used which consisted of administering a paper and pencil, self-report questionnaire to a total of 672 students enrolled in three upper level undergraduate management courses at a large public university in the southwestern United States. Participation was voluntary and a nominal amount of extra credit was provided to students in exchange for completing the questionnaire. In the end, 505 subjects completed the questionnaire for a response rate of 75.2 percent. For quality control, we removed subjects from the study that failed to provide complete answers to all of the scales in the survey. This step resulted in our using 324 questionnaires in the analysis. Participants' ages ranged from 18-38 with a mean age of 22 years. Forty-nine percent of respondents were female.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is the compound trait of strategic independence. Consistent with prior studies (cf., Kirby et al., 2016; Konopaske et al, 2017), strategic independence was measured by combining the two traits of achievement-striving and planfulness: (1) the 15-item achievement striving facet of conscientiousness from the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and (2) the 10-item planfulness subscale of the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1996). The CPI is used by researchers to "assess attributes of personality relevant to behavior in everyday settings such as school, work, the family, and relationships to peers" (Gough & Lanning, 1986: p. 205). The inventory is used in a variety of research studies, including understanding more about the relationships between high school and college students' scores on the CPI and their academic performance (Gough, 1985). Other CPI-related research has explored how scores on the CPI relate to individuals' career choices and decisions (Bartnick et al., 1985; Newman et al., 1999) and career profiles (Gough, 1995). Data were gathered from respondents using a 7-point Likert type response scale (1 = "Never" and 7 = "Always"). Sample items include: "I stick to my chosen path" and "I go straight for the goal." Cronbach's alpha for scores on this compound trait scale was .90.

Independent Variable

This study examines the impact of mentoring on strategic independence. Eleven items from the Mentorship Effectiveness Scale (Berk et al., 2005) were used to measure mentoring effectiveness. Respondents were asked to think about the times they interacted with their college professors, advisors of student groups, and career services advisors. Data were gathered from respondents using a 7-point Likert response scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 7 = "Strongly Agree"). Sample items include: "My mentor was accessible" and "My mentor was helpful in providing direction and guidance on professional issues (e.g., networking)." Cronbach's alpha for scores on this scale was .97.

Control Measures

To assess the unique impact of mentoring on strategic independence, we controlled for variables assessed in prior related studies into the composite trait (cf., Kirby et al., 2016; Konopaske et al., 2017). In particular, they were sex, age, socially desirable responses, proactivity, grit, and self-control.

Sex

Recent research investigating relationship between gender and mentoring effectiveness has found that formal mentoring programs can be different for women and men. This is especially important given the dearth of women in senior positions relative to men and the restricted opportunities for effective informal mentoring relationships to arise (Anderson, 2020; Bishop, 2019). Therefore, we control for the subject gender with females coded as 0 and males as 1.

Age

Older workers and students often have more experiences to bring to a situation, and thus prior studies have shown that age is a significant variable impacting mentoring effectiveness (Feldman et al., 1999). Therefore, the age of students was operationalized in number of years.

Socially Desirable Responses (SDR)

Social desirability can be considered a style of responding that contaminates and distorts measures of psychological variables (Nicholson & Hogan, 1990). Therefore, SDR must be controlled in any study using psychological variables (Crant, 1996). SDR was assessed using Reynold's (1982) 13-item short form of Marlowe-Crowne's social desirability scale, with sample items including "No matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener" and "I have never deliberately said something to hurt someone's feelings." Higher scores indicate greater level of socially desirable responses. Internal consistency reliability for the scale was calculated at 0.76

Proactive Personality

In a study of university graduate and undergraduate students, Bateman and Crant (1993) found a significant positive relationship between proactive personality traits and student engagement outside the formal classroom. Therefore, we controlled for the effects of proactive personality using the 17-item proactive personality scale developed by Bateman and Crant (1993). Sample items include "I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life" and "I am great at turning problems into opportunities." Scores were averaged to arrive at a single result, with a higher score indicating a greater level of proactive personality. The scale reliability was calculated at 0.88.

Grit

Grit is defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals, and is positively related to success in numerous endeavors (Duckworth et al., 2007). Perseverance and the ability to stick with an action to its conclusion is positively related to mentoring effectiveness (Oxford & Bolaños-Sánchez, 2016) Additionally, grit is a trait that is gaining acceptance in primary education as an important component of success (Tough, 2013). To measure this construct, the 12-item Grit Scale was used from Duckworth et al. (2007). When collecting data from participants, a 5-item Likert type response scale was used anchored by

1 = "Not like me at all" and 5 = "Very much like me." Sample items include "I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge" and "I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest" (reverse scored). Cronbach's alpha was 0.71.

Self-Control

Self-control is defined as the voluntary regulation of behavioral, emotional, and attentional impulses when presented with immediate temptations (Duckworth et al., 2007). Self-control is an important construct in predicting academic achievement and other positive outcomes. Therefore, it can be argued that young people who possess high levels of self-control will be more likely to stay focused on long-term goals while avoiding short-term impulses and distractions. Self-control was measured with the 13-item Self-Control Scale (Tangey, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Data were collected from respondents using a 5-point Likert type response scale (1 = "Not like me at all" and 5 = "Very much like me"). Sample items include: "I am good at resisting temptation" and "I blurt out whatever is on my mind" (reverse scored). The reliability coefficient for this scale was .82.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for the variables in the study. Multiple measures of different elements of the same phenomenon are important for improved construct validity; however they are frequently intercorrelated with one another (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). An examination of the correlation matrix indicates that all of the correlation coefficients are considerably less than 0.8 in absolute value, a frequently cited and commonly used threshold for the detection of multicollinearity (Kennedy, 2008).

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS (N=324)

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Strategic Ind.	4.78	.64							
2. Sex	.51	.50	.00						
3. Age	21.74	2.96	.07	.20**					
4. SDR	5.90	2.83	.31**	.00	.09				
5. Proactivity	5.39	.77	.56**	.01	.07	.14**			
6. Grit	3.37	.50	.63**	.01	.15**	.38**	.35**		
7. Self-Control	3.07	.68	.57**	-.01	.10*	.45**	.28**	.59**	
8. Mentoring Effect.	5.45	1.15	.29**	-.04	-.02	.03	.24**	.23**	.15**

* significant at p < .05
** significant at p < .01

Hierarchical Regression Models

To first assess the impact of mentoring effectiveness on strategic independence, hierarchical regression analysis was employed. This technique was used to assess the impact of the predictor measure on strategic independence over-and-above the effects of the control variables, and is consistent with the methodology applied in other explorations of the interrelated constructs surrounding strategic independence (cf., Kirby et al., 2016; Konopaske et al., 2017). Following the recommendations of Cohen and Cohen (1983), the demographic and trait-based control variables were entered into the initial equation. Specifically, these were sex, age, socially desirable responses, proactive personality, grit, and self-control. To test the hypothesis, mentoring effectiveness was entered in the second block to assess its impact over-and-above to control variables.

An important issue in hierarchical regression analysis is that of practical significance. Although a measure can be statistically significant, questions can be raised over whether it is practically significant. Does the measure improve decision making and task prediction enough to justify its inclusion? Yates and Taub (2003) argue that, in behavioral research, if a measure is relatively easy and cost-free to administer, it can be said to have practical significance if it aids in the prediction of the outcome under study.

While there are multiple ways of determining practical significance, a widely accepted method is through an assessment of incremental validity (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003). Incremental validity is defined as "the extent to which a measure adds to the prediction of a criterion beyond what can be predicted with other data" (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003, p. 443). Incremental validity can be assessed by calculating a measure's semi-partial r when using hierarchical regression analysis (Cohen, 1992). The semi-partial r is computed as the square root of the $R^2 \Delta$ value for the regression equation. As variables are added to an equation, r increments generally decrease because variables in behavioral research are frequently interrelated (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Most relationships fall within $r = 0.10$ to 0.30 in behavioral research (Hunsley & Meyer, 2003). Cohen (1992) identifies this as the small to medium range.

The results of the hierarchical regression equations testing hypothesis are shown in Table 2. Both steps in the model are significant, and the $F \Delta$ value in step 2 is also significant, signifying that each block of variables significantly improves the explanatory power over the preceding model. Also, the semi-partial r value for Step 2 is in the acceptable range, thereby indicating the model has practical significance. In Step 2, mentoring effectiveness is positive and significant, thus supporting the hypothesis.

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS ON STRATEGIC INDEPENDENCE (N=324)

Variable	Step 1 (controls)			Step 2 (mentoring)		
	B	s.e.	β	B	s.e.	β
Constant	.86	.24		.68	.25	
Sex	-.06	.05	-.05	-.05	.05	-.04
Age	-.00	.01	-.02	-.00	.01	-.01
SDR	.00	.01	.01	.00	.01	.00
Proactivity	.31	.03	.36**	.30	.03	.36**
Grit	.46	.06	.35**	.43	.06	.33**
Self-Control	.25	.04	.26**	.25	.04	.26**
Mentoring				.06	.02	.11**
F-score	74.27**			66.21**		
Δ F-score	74.27**			8.02**		
R^2	.58			.60		
ΔR^2	.58**			.01		
Adjusted R^2	.58			.59		
Semi-partial r				.10		

* significant at p < .05
** significant at p < .01

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the degree to which an important external influence, mentoring effectiveness, relates to young adults' propensity for strategic independence. Mentoring effectiveness was positively influenced strategic independence, supporting our hypothesis. It is not surprising that this study found that mentoring effectiveness is positively related to young adults' ability to make plans and see them through to achieve their long-term goals, such as transitioning from being college students to independent adults. Existing research has found that mentoring relates to many positive long-term outcomes, such as increase academic performance and retention (Eby et al., 2008), career development activities (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Voetmann and Kendall (2019) found that people will be more likely to participate in mentoring programs if they are given more time at work to do so. Assuming that promoting strategic independence in young adults is a goal of colleges and universities, this would be a wise use of organizational resources.

It is interesting to note that all three of the control personality measures (proactivity, grit, and self-control) were statistically significant. Of these, proactivity had a slightly larger effect size than the others. This is consistent with previous research that found proactive personality among employees linked to career-related initiative-taking and outcomes (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Seibert et al., 2001). Proactivity has also been shown to predict job search success for college students (Brown et al., 2006). In essence, proactive college students are more inclined to make long-term plans and see them through in areas such as moving from college into early careers.

This study's finding also suggest grit is a successful predictor of strategic independent for young adults in college. Grit is a robust trait in positively impacting many career-related and academic outcomes (Bowman et al., 2015; Duckworth & Allred, 2012). Basically, grit is a critical factor for achieving long-term goals that require perseverance. For many college students nearing graduation and facing our current projected abysmal job market (Carlson, 2020), grit may be an essential trait for helping students to make and adhere to plans that will help them transition towards independent adulthood.

Finally, self-control also had a positive effect on young adults' strategic independence. This outcome is consistent with the findings of prior research that self-control is positively related to both academic and career success (Duckworth & Allred, 2012) and negatively related to procrastination (Converse et al., 2012). The upshot is that young adults exhibiting higher levels of self-control are more likely to also exhibit strategic independent.

The current study contributes to research on individual differences in a variety of ways. First, mentoring effectiveness was found to be a positive and significant predictor of young adults' propensity to make and adhere to plans in order to achieve long-term goals. As faculty, we have a significant impact on helping our graduating students successfully transition into strategically independent adults. This study also builds our understanding of how positive dispositional traits predict strategic independence, which is an important outcome related to making a successful transition to independent adulthood. A final contribution of this research is the further development of the compound trait, strategic independence. This trait, with its components of achievement striving and planfulness, is a parsimonious construct that helps build our understanding of what it takes for young adults to transition from parental dependence toward full independent adulthood (Konopaske et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

Like all research, the current study has strengths and limitations. Strengths include the fact that the majority of scales included reverse scored items, used Likert (e.g., strongly agree) and Likert type (e.g., "Not like me at all") scales, and scales with different anchoring points (e.g., 1-7 and 1-5) to mitigate the risk of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The risk of social response bias was addressed by making the questionnaires anonymous and controlling statistically for socially desirable responses. Even with these controls in place, cross-sectional, single-source research designs greatly reduce one's ability to infer causality. Another key strength of the current study is its use of validated measures of several of the constructs, including proactive personality, self-control, and grit.

Future researchers could draw upon these findings to explore the impact of strategic independence on performance measures. It is feasible that it may moderate the impact of other positive dispositional variables as well, thereby helping us better understand and possibly decrease the negative stereotypes often associated with the current generation of young adults.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of the current research study confirm that young adults who are proactive, demonstrate self-control and possess grit are more likely to exhibit strategic independence. Most importantly, this can also be increased through effective mentoring relationships. As university faculty, we have the responsibility and ability to implant both knowledge and skills in our students that will help them become positive contributors to society. However, as this study demonstrates, this not only happens in our classrooms through content-oriented lectures and activities, it also happens through our mentoring relationships outside the class.

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