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Effects of Mentor's Negative Mentoring Experiences on Work-life Balance: Moderated Mediating Effect of Prosocial Motivation and Emotional Exhaustion

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ABSTRACT

As a classic talent development model, mentoring still has irreplaceable value in scenarios that emphasize personalization, practice, and experience transfer. However, there are negative mentoring experiences in the mentor-protégé relationship, which have critical implications for both mentors and protégés as well as for organizational growth. Ongoing research, nevertheless, has only concentrated on its impacts on the individual protégé and ignored its impacts on the mentor. This paper constructs a moderated mediation research framework based on the Job Demands-Resources model, which not only examines the impact of a mentor's negative mentoring experiences on work-life balance but also highlights the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of prosocial motivation. By collecting and analyzing data from 141 employees from a large hotel group in South China who were currently mentoring others, we found that mentors' negative mentoring experience significantly and positively affected emotional exhaustion, but this was moderated by mentors' prosocial motivation. It is further found that emotional exhaustion mediated the relationship between mentors' negative mentoring experience and work-life balance, and fortunately, the mentor's prosocial motivation still moderates this mediating mechanism. The above findings, which are derived from mentors' own psychological experience, serve to enrich and improve the body of literature in the mentoring research field and have important managerial practice implications for organizations implementing the mentoring system for talent development.

Mentoring has long been recognized as a critical mechanism for career development and knowledge transfer in organizations. Traditionally, mentoring relationships are conceived as mutually beneficial, providing protégés with guidance and support while offering mentors opportunities for leadership development and personal growth (Scandura, 1992). However, increasing research suggests that not all mentoring relationships are uniformly positive (Eby et al., 2000; Hu et al., 2022). Negative mentoring experiences characterized by poor communication, misaligned expectations, and problematic relational dynamics can lead to adverse outcomes for protégés and mentors (Eby et al., 2004; Eby et al., 2008). Despite its potential implications for organizational effectiveness, existing literature has predominantly explored how negative mentoring affects protégés, leaving a notable gap regarding the consequences for mentors (Hu et al., 2022).

Recent empirical studies have underscored that mentors are susceptible to the adverse effects of dysfunctional mentoring relationships. Negative mentoring experiences may evoke feelings of frustration and demotivation among mentors, thereby undermining their mental wellness. For instance, although prior research has documented the detrimental impacts of negative mentoring on protégé outcomes, such as reduced job satisfaction and increased turnover intentions (Eby et al., 2008), limited attention has been given to the consequences of mentors' own negative mentoring experiences. For example, Hu et al. (2022) found that mentors who have negative experiences in the mentoring relationship are more likely to feel ego depletion, which may reduce their creativity. This oversight is significant because mentors' well-being is essential for sustaining effective mentoring programs, which in turn contribute to organizational performance and talent retention. Therefore, additional research should be conducted to examine the potential consequences of the mentor's negative mentoring experiences.

Central to understanding the potential consequences for mentors is the concept of emotional exhaustion. Defined as a state of feeling emotionally overextended and drained of one's emotional resources (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), emotional exhaustion is a core component of burnout and is widely considered as a critical indicator of employee well-being. When mentors face persistent negative interactions or behaviors within the mentoring dyad, the accumulation of stress can lead to emotional exhaustion, which adversely affects their job performance, creativity, and even their personal life. Given the pervasive nature of workplace stress, it is essential to explore how such negative experiences may uniquely impact mentors and to identify the mechanisms through which these effects are manifested. Another important aspect in the mentoring context is prosocial motivation, which refers to the built-in aspiration to serve others through one's work. Prosocial motivation has been shown to enhance job performance and promote positive organizational behaviors (Grant, 2007). In mentoring relationships, a mentor's prosocial orientation may serve as a vital resource, enabling them to view challenges as opportunities to help and support others, even in the face of adverse interactions (Bear & Hwant, 2015). This perspective suggests that mentors with high prosocial motivation might be better equipped to buffer the negative effects of poor mentoring experiences. They may engage in proactive coping strategies that reduce the impact of stress and prevent the escalation of emotional exhaustion. However, the empirical literature regarding how prosocial motivation might moderate the relationship between negative mentoring experiences and subsequent emotional outcomes for mentors remains limited.

The present study seeks to fill this critical gap by testing a moderated mediating model in which mentors' negative mentoring experiences lead to increased emotional exhaustion, which in turn adversely impacts their work-life balance. Importantly, we propose that this indirect effect is contingent upon the level of prosocial motivation exhibited by the mentor. Specifically, mentors with higher levels of prosocial motivation may demonstrate a weaker link between negative mentoring and emotional exhaustion, thereby mitigating the detrimental effects on their work-life balance. By examining these relationships, our research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dark side of mentoring and its impact on mentors.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Negative Mentoring Experience and Emotional Exhaustion

Negative mentoring experience originated from Scandura's (1992) research on 'effective mentoring', 'orderline mentoring', and 'abnormal mentoring', and then Eby et al. (2000) detailed the research on 'abnormal mentoring' to formally define negative mentoring experience, and Eby et al. (2004) further divided it into protégé's negative mentoring experience and mentor's negative mentoring experience based on the difference of perceived subjects. Mentor's negative mentoring experience refers to the mentor's perception of negative behaviours and characteristics, such as the mentee's unwillingness to learn, negative interactions with each other, and the mentor's reduced willingness to mentor. Existing research has predominantly concentrated on the protégé's negative mentoring experiences and their effects on the emotions, intentions, and behaviors of both protégés and mentors. For instance, such negative experiences can lead to protégé frustration (Eby et al., 2004), turnover intentions (Hu et al., 2024), and reduced organizational citizenship behavior (Kumar et al., 2013). Additionally, these experiences can impact the mentor's creativity (Hu et al., 2022) and knowledge acquisition (Astrove & Kraimer, 2022). However, there is little existing research that focuses on the impact of negative mentoring experiences perceived by mentors themselves. In fact, Yi et al. (2017) have noted that mentors' perceptions of relationship problems can affect their psychology and behavior. Consequently, this paper posits that a more comprehensive exploration of mentors' negative mentoring experience would yield profound benefits for both individuals and organizations.

Emotional depletion reflects the stock of an individual's emotional resources (Maslach et al., 2001). It refers to a situation in which an individual's physiological and psychological resources are overly depleted owing to workplace stress, when individuals tend to show fatigue, anxiety, and withdrawal (Grant et al., 2014). Current research has extensively investigated emotional exhaustion from various perspectives. At the individual level, scholars have investigated the effects of self-efficacy (Dicke et al., 2014), technology anxiety (Teng et al., 2024), job stress (Calvin et al., 2024), role ambiguity and role conflict (Zhang et al., 2023) on emotional exhaustion. At the leadership level, they have investigated the effects of abusive leadership (Calvin et al., 2024), servant leadership (Yikilmaz et al., 2024) and ethical leadership (Ivana et al., 2025) on emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, emotional exhaustion has been shown to be detrimental to employees and organizations in various degrees, such as reducing employee creativity (Gong et al., 2021), decreasing job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2019), increasing willingness to leave (Calvin et al., 2024), leading to work-life conflict (Yi et al., 2017) and so on. Evidently, emotional exhaustion can result from a combination of factors and may affect

individual and organizational development. The mentor-protégé relationships are still prevalent, and we suggest that negative mentoring relationships may deplete the mentor's or protégé's own resources. Hence, there is a need to investigate the mechanisms between mentors' negative mentoring experience and emotional exhaustion. Existing research is lacking for this piece and the paper will fill this research gap.

In the context of mentoring, negative mentoring experiences are characterized by unsupportive, ambiguous, or even abusive interactions that deviate from the expected norms of a developmental relationship (Scandura, 1992). Such experiences place additional demands on mentors, who are traditionally viewed as resource providers. When mentors encounter persistent negativity, such as lack of engagement, resistance to feedback, or disrespectful behavior, they may face increased role conflict and uncertainty regarding their professional identity (Eby et al., 2008). According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, any work environment characterized by high demands and insufficient resources predisposes individuals to burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In mentoring relationships, negative experiences can be seen as situational demands that deplete mentors' emotional reserves (Hu et al., 2022). Over time, this emotional depletion manifests as emotional exhaustion, a key dimension of burnout, where individuals feel overextended, drained, and unable to recover from the interpersonal strain (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Moreover, mentors who experience negative interactions may feel that their efforts to support proteges are not reciprocated or valued, which in turn undermines their sense of efficacy and motivation. This lack of reciprocity can further intensify stress responses as mentors begin to question the value of their role. The cumulative effect of these negative interactions may lead to chronic emotional strain, thereby increasing the risk of emotional exhaustion. As such, the theoretical framework proposes that perceived negative mentoring experiences positively predict emotional exhaustion among mentors.

Hypothesis 1: Mentor's negative mentoring experience is positively related to mentor's emotional exhaustion.

The Moderating Effect of Prosocial Motivation

Prosocial motivation is an altruistic motivation shown by individuals, which is usually accompanied by altruistic behaviors such as helping, caring and concern in order to gain others' acknowledgment and meet their expectations (Aydinli et al., 2014). Also, prosocial motivation can bring intrinsic energy satisfaction to individuals. These traits have shaped the existing research framework, which reveals that prosocial motivation positively interacts with an individual's organizational citizenship behavior (Hu & Liden, 2015), mentoring willingness (Bear & Hwang, 2015) and knowledge sharing (Tian et al., 2021). Based on this, existing research has looked at the moderating effects of prosocial motivation. Individuals with high prosocial motivation have been found to have greater corporate social responsibility (Kim & Kim, 2021) and the ability to mitigate emotions. Moreover, Lebel and Patil (2018) stated that employees high in prosocial motivation can remain proactive in dealing with negative behaviors of their supervisors. However, we did not detect empirical evidence studying the link between mentors' prosocial motivation and negative mentoring experience. Actually, mentors' prosocial motivation might promote their proactive mentoring and proactive caring, which may in turn

contribute to negative experience reduction (Lazar & Eisenberger, 2022). Therefore, this paper considers a need to address the boundary effect of mentors' prosocial motivation on their negative mentoring experience, providing a fresh research direction to settle the negative mentoring experience.

In this study, we propose that prosocial motivation can serve as an important psychological resource, enabling mentors to reframe adverse interactions in a more constructive light. Highly prosocial motivated mentors can view challenging situations not solely as threats but also as opportunities to improve their interpersonal and leadership skills (Grant, 2008). From a theoretical standpoint, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model posits that while high work demands, such as negative mentoring experiences, tend to drain personal resources and lead to emotional exhaustion, the presence of sufficient personal resources can buffer this effect (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In this context, prosocial motivation represents a vital personal resource. Motivated by desires to facilitate others, mentors may be more likely employ proactive coping strategies and experience a sense of purpose even facing difficult interpersonal dynamics. This positive reappraisal of negative interactions helps conserve their emotional resources, thereby reducing the risk of burnout (Lanaj et al., 2016). Empirical evidence further supports this buffering role. Studies on leadership and mentoring contexts have demonstrated that individuals with a high level of prosocial orientation are more prone to report lower levels of stress and burnout under adverse conditions (Bolino & Grant, 2016). This suggests that mentors with prosocial motivations may be less susceptible to the emotional toll typically associated with persistent negative interactions. Instead, they might interpret such experiences as isolated challenges that do not undermine their broader commitment to supporting others, thus maintaining their overall well-being.

Hypothesis 2: Mentor's prosocial motivation moderates the relationship between mentor's negative mentoring experience and mentor's emotional exhaustion, such that the relationship is not significant when mentor's prosocial motivation is high.

The Mediating Effect Emotional Exhaustion

We further propose a mediating effect between negative mentoring experience and work-life balance through emotional exhaustion. Work-life balance can be read in two dimensions, on the one hand highlighting the coordination between work and family roles, and on the other hand, highlighting the effectiveness of individuals in allocating their own resources in a balanced way (Clark, 2000; Duxbury & Higgins, 2001). As a common outcome variable in the workplace that can reflect an individual's state, its predictors were mainly concerned on by a number of researchers. It was found that family level, family support (Russo et al., 2016), the family division of labour patterns (Kurowska, 2020) and marital status (Amazue & Onyishi, 2016; Denson & Szelényi, 2022) affect individuals' work-life balance; from work level, organizational support (Amazue & Onyishi, 2016; Irfan et al., 2023), supervisor support and (Talukder, 2019) and flexible working (Ayar et al., 2022; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022) affect work-life balance level. Additionally, individual differences contribute significantly to work-life balance such as gender (Emslie & Hunt, 2009), personality traits (Miller et al., 2022), emotion management and stress coping capacities, etc. (Amazue & Onyishi, 2016). Scholars also proved the significance of work-life balance on individuals and organizations such as well-

being (Fotiadis et al., 2019), mental health (Haar et al., 2014), job satisfaction (Haar et al., 2014) and job performance (Tamunomiebi & Oyibo, 2020). For a mentor, his work-life balance in a fast-paced workplace environment not only leads to a personal-family-work ripple effect but also serves as one of the key issues for organizational sustainability. Accordingly, it makes sense to attend to the key factors influencing the mentor's work-life balance as well as to reveal the moderating factors, which will facilitate bridging the intersection gap between studies on mentorship and work-life balance.

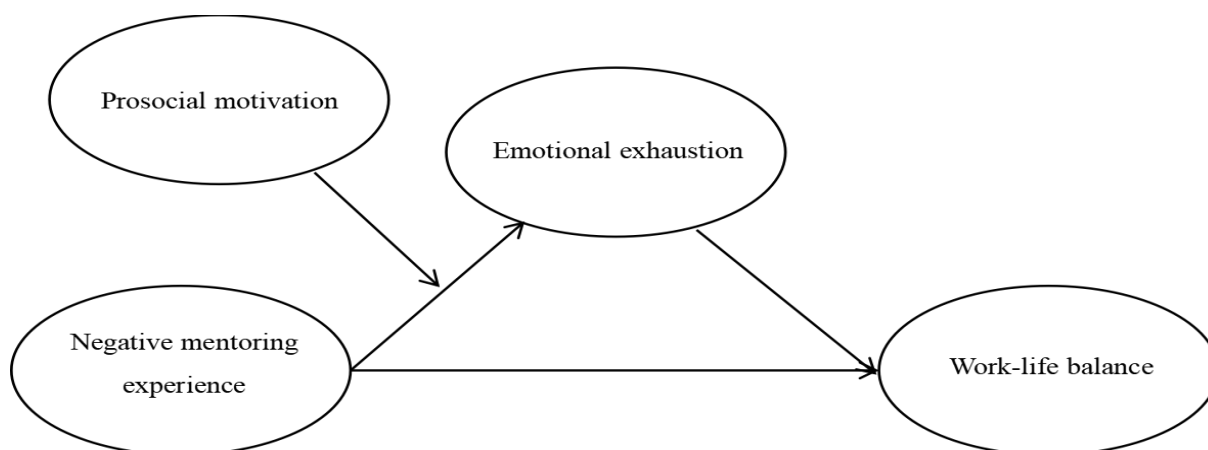
Negative mentoring experiences impose significant psychological demands on mentors that, over time, can lead to emotional exhaustion. Depending on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, such negative experiences act as work stressors that deplete an individual's emotional resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). As mentors encounter unsupportive interactions, role ambiguity, and unreciprocated efforts within the mentoring relationship, they experience heightened levels of stress. This persistent strain manifests in emotional exhaustion, a state characterized by feelings of being overextended and depleted, which is a critical precursor to burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The depletion of emotional resources due to negative mentoring experiences not only affects mentors at work but also spills over into their personal lives, disrupting their work-life balance. When mentors become emotionally exhausted, they lose the energy and psychological capacity required to maintain healthy boundaries between work and home. For instance, emotionally exhausted individuals are less likely to engage in recovery activities during non-work hours, which diminishes their ability to effectively separate work-related stress from personal time (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Consequently, the impaired work-life balance may result in decreased satisfaction in both domains and potentially lower overall well-being. In this context, emotional exhaustion serves as a critical mediator between negative mentoring experiences and work-life balance. That is, negative experiences do not directly disrupt work-life balance; rather, they erode mentors' emotional resources, leading to burnout. This mediating role has been substantiated in various studies linking workplace stressors to diminished work-life balance through the pathway of emotional exhaustion (Correia et al., 2023). In essence, mentors who are subjected to chronic negative interactions tend to become emotionally drained, which in turn compromises how effectively they manage personal and professional responsibilities.

Hypothesis 3: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between mentor's negative mentoring experience and work-life balance.

On the basis of these three hypotheses, we develop an additional moderated mediating effect. The full conceptual model is shown in [Figure 1](#).

Hypothesis 4: Mentor's prosocial motivation moderates the indirect effect between mentor's negative mentoring experience and work-life balance via mentor's emotional exhaustion, such that the relationship is not significant when mentor's prosocial motivation is high.

Figure 1
The Conceptual Model



Method

Sample and Procedure

To examine the hypotheses, we collected data from a large hotel group in South China. All the newcomers to this hotel group will be assigned a mentor after they enter the organization. The mentoring program will officially last for one year. Mentors are senior employees who have more than three years of organizational tenure and will only be assigned to one protegee at the same time. After obtaining permission from the upper management of the hotel group, we randomly selected 200 employees who currently mentored others.

To avoid common variance bias, we collected the data in two waves. Specifically, at Time 1, questionnaires were distributed to the 200 mentors and we got 186 returned, for a response rate of 93%. The cover page of each questionnaire informed respondents of the voluntary nature and confidentiality of this research. At time 2 (three weeks later), we distributed the second-wave questionnaires to the 186 employees who returned the survey at Time 1. We obtained responses from 141 respondents for a response rate of 75.8%. Of the sample, the average age was 25.4, 34% were male mentors, and the average organization tenure was 4.7 years. The specific demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Analysis

Demographic variable	Sample distribution	Sample size	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	48	34.04%
	Female	93	65.96%
Age	Under 20 years old	46	32.62%
	21~30 years old	67	47.52%
	31~40 years old	22	15.60%
Education	Over 41 years old	6	4.26%
	Junior high school and below	5	3.55%
	High school	77	54.61%
	College diploma or bachelor's degree	44	31.21%
Tenure	Master's degree	14	9.93%
	Doctor	1	0.71%
	1-4 years	86	60.99%
	5-8 years	27	19.15%
	9-12 years	28	19.86%

Measures

All the measurements used in this study were adopted from the existing literature. Except for emotional exhaustion, all the other variables were measured by the five-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Because the survey was conducted in Chinese, we adopted back-translation procedures to ensure all the measures were translated properly (Brislin, 1980). Specifically, one researcher translated the measurement items from English to Chinese, and another researcher translated the Chinese back to English. After that, they worked along with a third researcher to compare the translation results, to ensure the equivalence in meaning. We also undertook an additional procedure during the design of the survey, including inviting HR for feedback and conducting the pilot test (Rousseau & Barends, 2011).

Negative mentoring experience was measured by the thirty-six-item scale developed by Eby et al. (2008). Sample items include "My protege does not do high quality work", "My protege and I have difficulty interacting" and "My protege sometimes distorts the truth" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Prosocial motivation was measured by the four-item scale developed by Grant (2008). Sample items include "I care about benefiting others through my work" and "I want to help others through my work" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$).

Emotional exhaustion was measured by a nine-item scale from the MBI-General survey developed by Maslach et al. (1996). The respondents were asked how often they feel the following emotions. The scales were measured by 1=once a month or less, 2=once a week, 3=several times a week, 4=once a day, and 5=several times a day. Sample items include "I feel emotionally drained from my work" and "I feel used up at the end of the workday" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Work-life balance was measured by a six-item scale by Drenzo et al. (2015). Sample items include "I can balance my work and personal responsibilities so that one does not upset the other" and "I am satisfied with the balance I have achieved between my work and personal life" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

Besides, we also include the mentor's age, gender, education level, and organizational tenure in the analysis to control the potential confounding effects.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to evaluate the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model. Specifically, we calculated the chi-square (χ^2), degree of freedom (df), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The four-factor model (including negative mentoring experience, prosocial motivation, emotional exhaustion and work-life balance) had a reasonable fit ($\chi^2/(1424) = 3574.74$, $\chi^2/df = 2.51$, $p < .01$; CFI = .90; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .09). Besides, all the factor loadings were significant, demonstrating the convergent validity. Moreover, as shown in Table 2, the Average Variance Explained (AVE) of each variable was greater than the shared variance between the corresponding variable and any other variable. Additionally, we also employed the HTMT method to validate discriminant

validity. The results are shown in Table 3, where all HTMT values between factors were below .85. Therefore, the discriminant validity was confirmed, and all four variables were included in the further analysis.

Table 2
Means, SD and Correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Gender	1.34	0.48								
Age	25.41	7.48	0.05							
Education	2.50	0.75	-0.20*	0.02						
Tenure	4.74	3.59	-0.17*	0.18*	0.06					
NME	2.28	0.57	-0.02	0.04	-0.19*	0.23**	(0.70)			
PM	2.93	0.59	0.01	0.08	0.06	0.07	-0.23**	(0.64)		
EE	1.81	0.64	0.00	0.04	-0.19*	0.09	0.46**	-0.14	(0.70)	
WLB	4.47	0.83	0.10	0.12	0.03	-0.03	-0.04	0.02	-0.33**	(0.89)

Note. N=141, * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Numbers in diagonal brackets are square roots of AVE, and the rest numbers are correlation coefficients; NME = negative mentoring experience, EE = emotional exhaustion, WLB = work-life balance, PM= prosocial motivation.

Table 3
HTMT Results

Variables	NME	PM	EE	WLB
NME	-			
PM	.34	-		
EE	.49	.21	-	
WLB	.09	.12	.36	-

Note. N=141; NME = negative mentoring experience, EE = emotional exhaustion, WLB = work-life balance, PM= prosocial motivation.

Hypotheses Testing

This section conducted a correlation analysis of the relationship between the variables with a person's correlation analysis, and the findings are shown in Table 2. There was a significant positive relationship between mentors' negative mentoring experience and emotional exhaustion ($r = .46$, $p < .01$) and a significant negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and work-life balance ($r = -.33$, $p < .01$). Such results furnished the underlying support for the research hypothesis.

We used PROCESS 3.5 to test our research hypothesis in this study. As shown in Table 4, after controlling for gender, age, education, and tenure, the coefficient of mentors' negative mentoring experience on emotional exhaustion remained significant. (see Model 1, $\beta = .49$, $p < .001$). As such, H1 received support. This is followed by the interaction terms of mentors' negative mentoring experience and prosocial motivation added to the model for exploring boundary conditions of the model. It was found that the interaction term had a significant effect on emotional exhaustion (see Model 2, $\beta = -.30$, $p < .05$). As such, H2 received support. We further plotted the moderating effect and calculated the simple slopes. The results in Figure 2 show that the relationship between negative mentoring experience and emotional exhaustion was positive and significant when prosocial motivation was high (+1 SD, $\beta = .53$, $p < .01$) but

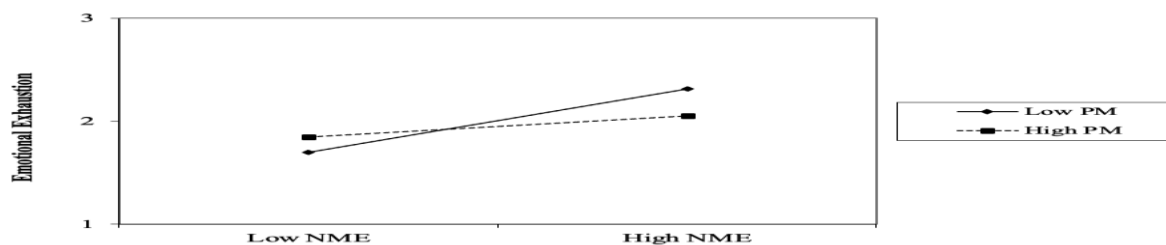
not significant when prosocial motivation was low (-1 SD, $\beta = .18$, n.s.), which further supported H2.

Table 4
The Results of the Main and Moderating Effects

Dependent variable	EE	
	Model 1	Model 2
Control variable		
gender	-.03	-.01
age	.00	.00
education	-.09	-.08
tenure	-.00	-.00
Independent variable		
NME	.49***	.35**
Moderator		
PM		-.05
PM * NME		-.30*
Mediator		
EE		
R ²	.48	.51
Adjusted R ²	.23	.26
F	7.92***	6.58***

Note. N = 141, * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; NME = negative mentoring experience, EE = emotional exhaustion, WLB = work-life balance, PM = prosocial motivation. Unstandardized coefficient values were presented.

Figure 2
The Moderating Effect of Prosocial Motivation



We further tested the indirect effect (H3) and the conditional indirect effect (H4). First, we used Model 4 in PROCESS 3.5 with 5,000 resamples to test the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion between negative mentoring experience and work-life balance. The results showed a significant indirect effect between negative mentoring experience and work-life balance via emotional exhaustion (effect = $-.26$, SE = $.08$, 95% CI $[-.43, -.11]$) at a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. Therefore, H3 was supported.

Meanwhile, we conducted another bootstrapping analysis based on 5000 resamples and found that the indirect effect of negative mentoring experience on work-life balance via emotional exhaustion was significant when prosocial motivation was low (effect = $-.28$, SE = $.08$, 95% CI $[-.45, -.13]$), but was not significant when prosocial motivation was high (effect = $-.09$, SE = $.11$, 95% CI $[-.34, .09]$). Further, the moderated mediating index was significant ($\beta = .16$, SE = $.08$, 95% CI $[.01, .32]$) at a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval, demonstrating the support of H4 (see Table 5).

Table 5
The Results of the Conditional Indirect Effects

NME→EE→WLB				
Mo=PM	Effect	BSE	95%LLCI	95%ULCI
Low	-.28	.08	-.45	-.13
High	-.09	.11	-.34	.09
Moderated mediation	.16	.08	.01	.32

Note. N=141; NME = negative mentoring experience, EE = emotional exhaustion, WLB = work-life balance, PM= prosocial motivation.

Discussion

The empirical analysis yielded several notable findings. First, as hypothesized, negative mentoring experiences were found to be positively associated with emotional exhaustion among mentors. Second, our moderation analysis demonstrated that prosocial motivation plays a crucial buffering role. Third, the mediation analysis confirmed that emotional exhaustion serves as a critical mechanism linking negative mentoring experiences to work-life balance. Finally, the moderated mediation analysis further supported our conceptual model: the adverse indirect effect on work-life balance was significant when mentors had low prosocial motivation but became non-significant when prosocial motivation was high. These results provide a broader insight into the “dark side” of the mentor-protégé relationship and have several theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

First, our study extends the application of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model to the mentoring context. Traditionally, the JD-R framework has been used to explain how high work demands and insufficient resources lead to burnout and reduced well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). By demonstrating that negative mentoring experiences serve as situational demands that deplete mentors' emotional resources, our findings underscore the relevance of the JD-R model in explaining mentor burnout. This extension is particularly important because it highlights that mentoring is not solely a developmental tool for protégés but also a source of stress for mentors when the relational quality is suboptimal. In doing so, our study bridges a gap outlined in the literature by focusing on mentors' own psychological experiences.

Second, our research empirically confirms the moderating effect of prosocial motivation in buffering the negative effects of dysfunctional mentoring relationships. Prosocial motivation, the intrinsic desire to benefit others through one's work, has been widely recognized as a driver of positive organizational behaviors (Grant, 2008). In our study, mentors with high prosocial motivation demonstrated a weakened relationship between negative mentoring experiences and emotional exhaustion. This suggests that the personal values and motivational orientations of mentors play a crucial role in making decisions about how they respond to interpersonal stressors. By integrating prosocial motivation into our moderated mediation model, our study provides a more nuanced and broader understanding of the boundary condition, and under which negative mentoring experiences affect mentor well-being.

Third, by adopting a moderated mediation framework, our study integrates both mediation and moderation processes in order to account for how and when negative mentoring experiences impair work-life balance. The mediating role of emotional exhaustion elucidates the mechanism through which negative experiences translate into broader life-domain conflicts. Meanwhile, the conditional effect of prosocial motivation highlights that the impact of negative mentoring

is not uniform across all individuals. This comprehensive approach advances theoretical models by providing empirical evidence that individual differences, to be more specific in this case, prosocial motivation, can mitigate the cascading effects of negative relational experiences on both emotional and personal outcomes. Such an integrated perspective is valuable for future research seeking to examine complex interrelationships among interpersonal stressors, emotional outcomes, and broader life consequences.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study are of particular implications for organizations aiming to optimize mentoring programs and enhance overall employee well-being. First, organizations should recognize that mentoring relationships have bidirectional effects. While considerable attention has traditionally been given to the virtues of mentoring for protégés, our study reveals that negative mentoring experiences can have profound adverse effects on mentors' psychological health and work-life balance. As a result, organizations should implement mechanisms to monitor and address negative mentoring dynamics. For instance, regular feedback systems and mentoring quality assessments could be established to ensure that both mentors and protégés are receiving mutual benefits from the relationship. Moreover, training programs focused on communication, conflict resolution, and role clarification may help prevent the onset of negative interactions, thereby reducing emotional exhaustion among mentors.

Second, fostering prosocial motivation among mentors could serve as a vital intervention strategy. Since our results indicate that high levels of prosocial motivation mitigate the negative impact of dysfunctional mentoring, organizations should consider selecting and training mentors with a strong prosocial orientation. Initiatives such as workshops on altruism, leadership with a service mindset, and reflective practices can help cultivate prosocial values. Additionally, recognition and reward systems that highlight altruistic behavior in mentoring could reinforce this orientation and create an organizational culture where supportive behaviors are valued. Such measures not only enhance mentor well-being but may also improve the overall quality and sustainability of mentoring programs, ultimately contributing to better talent development and organizational performance.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes to our understanding of how mentors' negative mentoring experiences affect their emotional exhaustion and work-life balance, several limitations should be noted. First, the data were collected exclusively from the mentor's perspective. Although the focus on mentors provides valuable insights into the “dark side” of mentoring, the absence of proteges' data limits our ability to fully understand the reciprocal nature of the mentoring relationship. It has already been revealed that proteges' experiences and behaviors may also influence mentors' perceptions and outcomes (Eby et al., 2008). Without incorporating the proteges' viewpoints, our analysis remains one-sided and may not capture the complex dynamics inherent in mentoring relationships. Future studies should consider employing a dyadic research design that gathers data from both mentors and proteges to better elucidate how interactions in the mentoring dyad contribute to emotional exhaustion and work-life balance.

A second limitation is that all the data in the current study were obtained through self-report measures. Self-evaluation can be subject to biases such as social desirability, common method

variance, and recall bias, which may affect the validity of the results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although our methodological design included procedural remedies such as a two-wave data collection to mitigate common method bias, reliance on self-reported perceptions still restricts our ability to draw definitive conclusions. Future research would benefit from incorporating more objective measures of both negative mentoring experiences and emotional exhaustion. For instance, incorporating measures of peer evaluations, supervisor ratings, or even physical stress (e.g., cortisol levels) could provide a more comprehensive picture of mentors' well-being and better validate self-reported data.

In addition, future research should also extend the investigation of negative mentoring experiences by exploring a broader range of consequences beyond emotional exhaustion. One promising avenue is to examine positive outcomes, such as mentor resilience and work thriving. Mentor resilience refers to the capacity to recover and adapt in the face of adversity (Luthans et al., 2006), which could serve as a critical factor in mitigating the long-term negative impacts of dysfunctional mentoring relationships. In parallel, work thriving, a state characterized by both vitality and learning, offers another valuable outcome dimension. Exploring work thriving may help illuminate how mentors not only cope with stressors but also potentially flourish, contributing to enhanced overall performance and well-being (Porath et al., 2012). In addition to broadening the range of outcomes, future studies should investigate additional boundary conditions that may moderate the relationship between negative mentoring experiences and their outcomes. While our study focused on prosocial motivation as an individual-level moderator, organizational support for mentoring is another critical contextual factor worthy of further exploration. Organizational support, manifested through structured mentoring programs, training opportunities, and proactive managerial practices, may buffer the adverse effects of negative mentoring by providing both instrumental and emotional resources (Allen et al., 2004). Integrating such macro-level factors into research designs can offer a more comprehensive picture of how environmental resources interact with individual characteristics to shape mentor outcomes.

Conclusion

In summary, the empirical findings confirm that negative mentoring experiences significantly increase mentors' emotional exhaustion, which in turn impairs work-life balance. Importantly, the buffering role of prosocial motivation suggests that mentors who are intrinsically driven to help others are more resilient to the negative effects of dysfunctional mentoring. Theoretically, our study extends the JD-R model to the mentoring context, confirms the moderating influence of prosocial motivation, and advances an integrated moderated mediation framework. Practically, our results underscore the need for organizations to monitor mentoring dynamics closely and cultivate prosocial orientations among mentors to safeguard their well-being and maintain a healthy work-life balance. These insights offer valuable guidance for designing more effective mentoring programs that support both mentors and protégés, thereby enhancing overall organizational performance.

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