

Increasing Career Advancement Opportunities Through Sponsorship: An Identity-Based Model With Illustrative Application to Cross-Race Mentorship of African Americans

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Abstract

The sponsorship function of mentoring has vast potential to increase career advancement for African American protégés in cross-race mentoring relationships but is not well understood. We conceptualize the processes, practices, and challenges involved in cross-race sponsorship of African American protégés through an identity perspective. We provide a theory regarding how identity processes are involved at different stages of cross-race sponsorship involving African American protégés, as well as for their mentors, by drawing on identity, diversity, and mentoring research. This work is suggestive of opportunities for improvement in the sponsorship function of mentoring in order to increase career

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advancement for African American protégés and provides theoretical contributions to research on identity, diversity, and career advancement.

Keywords

diversity, mentoring, identity or identification, gender, minority

Recent attention has been directed toward organizations for excluding African Americans and other demographic groups from key organizational positions and failing to provide individuals from such groups with a sense of being valued as equal participants (Center for Talent Innovation, 2019; O'Brien, 2016). Diversity scholars and practitioners have long recognized these challenges related to the complex effects of demographic dissimilarity in organizations (Roberson, Ryan, & Ragins, 2017), yet the need to increase career advancement opportunities for individuals from underrepresented groups persists (Graham, Belliveau, & Hotchkiss, 2017; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). One of the practices that scholars and practitioners have recommended to address these issues is mentoring because of its ability to advance protégé career trajectories, provide psychosocial support, and facilitate growth and career development (Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1983; Ragins, 2012). Past research has considered mentoring to include psychosocial functions (e.g., providing friendship and support) as well as career-related functions, such as sponsorship (Allen, Eby, Chao, & Bauer, 2017; Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007; Kram, 1983).

Sponsorship is a component of mentoring that is explicitly instrumental and focuses on speeding up the protégé's exposure to influential networks and advanced career opportunities through the exercise of mentor influence (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). What has yet to be incorporated into theory on sponsorship is the identity work that is likely to be required by both mentor and protégé as sponsorship unfolds over time. Hence, a novel feature of our theorizing is the application of an identity lens. Most mentorship relationships are heavily reliant on identity formation and negotiation processes, given that mentors and protégés contribute to the other's understanding of themselves, including self-concept and self-definition (Hall & Burns, 2009). However, the sponsorship function of mentoring is especially susceptible to identity change as protégés adjust their conceptions of self to advanced career roles and mentors adjust notions of their primary responsibilities (Muir, 2014). As we will elaborate, doing so also entails risks for both parties since each is more vulnerable to uncertainty regarding reputation and competency.

We further argue that the provision of sponsorship in cross-race mentoring pairs is likely to be especially important because mentoring relationships that emphasize a career focus involving sponsorship are more strongly positively related to objective measures of career success (such as promotion and compensation) than mentoring relationships that lack sponsorship and are solely focused on the psychosocial elements of the mentoring relationship (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Relatedly, recent meta-analysis results indicate that psychosocial support is not always a route to career outcomes and satisfaction in the workplace (Eby et al., 2013). In addition, although social support is often forthcoming, nonwhite protégés have reported receiving less instrumental support during mentorship than white protégés resulting in negative implications for career advancement (Noy & Ray, 2012). And finally, white mentors in particular may have access to networks and resources that other mentors do not, and mentorship from white males has been tied to an increase in protégé salary relative to other mentors (Dreher & Cox, 1996; Underhill, 2006). Hence, sponsorship may be particularly critical for career advancement of African Americans because of the bias and discrimination that continues to persist in organizations for African Americans.

Yet, identity-relevant challenges are likely exacerbated even further during cross-race sponsorship due to the potentially divergent backgrounds, experiences, and goals of protégés and mentors from different races, which are fundamental to identity formation and may come into conflict. Mentoring across cultural lines is a fragile event that connects group norms and social constraints and assumptions with individual traits and identities (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002). At the same time, these differences make cross-race sponsorship especially relevant given increased access to new networks and opportunities. Thus, examining identity-related challenges in this setting is particularly important because mentors in this context have the potential to make significant contributions toward positively influencing the career advancement of protégés whose identities are both visually perceptible and subject to biases.

A need for mentoring across races is all the more urgent, given recent events around the world such as the Black Lives Matter movement, which have brought to the forefront highly discriminatory practices. To be sure, these practices have roots in centuries of systemic racism (Omi & Winant, 2014). Race is both a historical social structure and a set of accumulated signifiers that suffuse individual and collective identities, inform social practices, shape institutions, and organize the distribution of resources. Race is also a psychological construct centered on societal cues with bidirectional synergy that depends on both being an individual as well as a member of a group (Tourse, Hamilton-Mason, & Wewiorski, 2018). The social construction of difference

and perception of nonwhite segments of the population as deviant or disadvantaged creates systemic racism that establishes how privilege, power, and wealth are appropriated (Tourse et al., 2018). Even the act of defining racial groups is a process filled with conflict, bewilderment, and unexpected consequences as classifications of race face challenges by groups and individuals who seek to assert distinct categories and identities (Omi & Winant, 2014). To address race in mentoring relationships necessarily involves interpretations and explanations of racial identities and meanings and the coordination and dissemination of resources along racial lines (Omi & Winant, 2014). These efforts can take place at both the macro level and at the level of everyday experience and personal interaction. How race is addressed in mentoring relationships can be seen as a reflection of and response to the broader patterning of race in the overall social system and also offers hope in working against systemic racism in that system.

Among African American protégés, cross-race sponsorship is a particularly dire need. The representation of African Americans in management ranks continues to be quite low with declines noted between 2007 and 2015 (Gynn, 2017). African Americans continue to receive less mentoring than whites notwithstanding the many efforts aimed at facilitating success for African Americans in organizations (Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008). Research also suggests that simply increasing the number of African Americans who are mentored would not be sufficient to reduce racial representation inequities, given that well-intentioned mentoring of African Americans has not consistently yielded desired benefits or has it been as efficacious as once hoped in advancing careers (Ibarra et al., 2010). For example, African Americans who receive mentorship that focuses on skill development (rather than on a fuller sense of development and career advancement) tend to experience career plateaus (Thomas, 2001). The mentoring literature suggests that one way to accelerate career advancement goals for African Americans is via cross-race mentorship because white mentors tend to have access to key networks that can accelerate African Americans' career advancement and achievement of other instrumental goals (c.f., Petersen, Saporta, & Seidel, 2000).

By examining the role of identity work in sponsorship and providing an illustrative case that focuses on non-African American mentors accelerating the career advancement goals for African American protégés, we accomplish three primary contributions. First, we extend theory on mentoring and identity by applying a temporal approach revealing the identity-related processes involved in sponsorship over time at each stage of the mentoring relationship (Mitchell & James, 2001). We follow Kram's (1983) stage framework for relationship development: (1) *initiation* (when sponsorship activities begin and expectations are set), (2) *cultivation* (when the protégé begins to benefit

from the career opportunities provided), (3) *separation* (when the protégé experiences greater autonomy and independence), and (4) *redefinition* (when the mentor–protégé relationship evolves into a new form). As Kram (1983) notes, these are likely to be sequential but not necessarily entirely distinct.

Second, we elucidate sponsorship as a critical component of mentorship relationships for accomplishing African American protégé career advancement reconciling previous findings that indicate less than desirable outcomes of mentoring for this important group. Not only do we highlight the importance of sponsorship in our theorizing but we also recognize the temporal considerations unique to sponsorship involving African American protégés in cross-race mentorship relationships. For example, mentors and African American- protégés may have different schemas for each stage that are influenced by the differences in their past experiences—such as experiences with systemic racism—and in their social identities as minority or majority group members (George & Jones, 2000; Tourse et al., 2018). Furthermore, mentors and protégés may have different perceptions of time that are reflected in having disparate expectations about making progress through these stages (Mitchell & James, 2001).

Third, we address potential barriers to cross-race mentoring by explaining that sponsorship can serve as a mechanism by which mentors come to see protégés as individuals seeking career achievement rather than viewing such mentoring relationships in terms of stereotypes, biases, and the uncertainty involved in interactions across racial boundaries. Mentorship relationships that entail sponsorship are accompanied by a role structure that guides interactions across the identity contrasts (Ibarra et al., 2010), helping to reorient both mentor and protégé away from the stereotypes, biases, and uncertainty that can accompany cross-demographic workplace interactions (Callero, 1994; Dreher & Cox, 1996; Guillaume, Dawson, Otaye-Ebede, Woods, & West, 2017). Figure 1 provides a depiction of our model.

We note several boundary conditions to our theorizing, which we return to in the discussion. First, we focus on existing mentoring relationships that are informal, in that, they are not part of a formal assignment and are engaged in by choice because these relationships have been found to have a stronger effect than formal mentoring on career-relevant outcomes (Underhill, 2006). Second, we focus on career advancement while acknowledging that other outcomes of mentoring, such as psychological well-being, are also important and can contribute to a protégé's ability to realize career advancement (Kong, Qian, Yang, & Gaoal, 2016). And finally, we illustrate our model in the instance of sponsorship of African American protégés by non-African American mentors for precision and parsimony and given the acknowledged importance of achieving greater equity in organizations (Guynn, 2017).

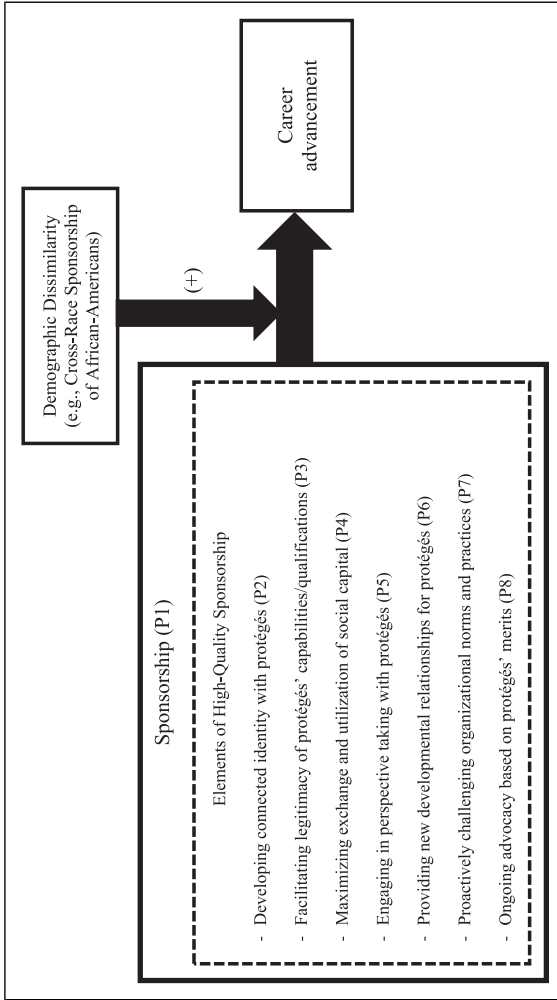


Figure 1. Increasing career advancement opportunities through sponsorship.

We acknowledge that the intersection of other dimensions of demographic diversity is also important, and we view the nuances associated with other underrepresented groups or the co-occurrence of membership in multiple underrepresented groups as a critical arena for future research. Together, we propose that a more holistic theoretical understanding of sponsorship that incorporates an identity perspective in cross-race mentoring relationships has the potential to increase clarity regarding how to facilitate greater career advancement, in particular for African Americans.

Theoretical Background

Sponsorship's primary purpose is for mentors to help accelerate protégé's career progress by leveraging networks and influence (Gubbins & Garavan, 2016). Mentors serve as conduits to other influential individuals who can accelerate advancement and ensure that protégés are considered for promotions or positions with responsibilities that go beyond those provided in their current jobs (Ibarra et al., 2010). Ultimately, effective sponsorship within the mentoring relationship is less about counsel and advice and more about opening doors. Sponsors may believe in their protégés more than the protégés believe in themselves, and their proactive efforts to open up career-enhancing opportunities provide career-accelerating momentum that extends beyond efforts such as goal setting discussions between a protégé and mentor (Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, & Sumbergal, 2010). Effective sponsors open up career advantages for protégés by creating opportunities for protégés to be exposed in beneficial ways to powerful individuals who in turn are hoped to further recognize and embrace the protégé's talents and potential (Hewlett, 2013; Paddison, 2013). Although sponsorship has been recognized as a potentially important component of mentoring (Haggard et al., 2011; Kram, 1983), the processes and challenges involved in sponsorship at each stage of the mentoring relationship have not been fully articulated, especially in the context of cross-race relationships involving African Americans.

An Identity Perspective

We develop an underutilized approach to sponsorship in cross-race relationships by grounding our theorizing in an identity perspective. An identity is a "self-referential description that provides answers to the question 'who am I' or 'who are we?'" (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008, p. 327). Individuals create an identity in part by connecting their beliefs about themselves to social groups (e.g., African Americans) through social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as well as to roles they see as central to their self-concept

(e.g., mentor and protégé) (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Karelaia & Guillen, 2014). Scholars consider identity to be a root construct in organizational science, given that most people have a sense of who or what they are, who or what others are, and how these are related (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Identity is integral to sponsorship activities. Securing sponsorship involves issues of self-presentation and trust and activates the building of particular types of identities (such as a relational identity or common in-group identity, as elaborated upon below) with someone who is demographically different from oneself (Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Ragins, 2012). It also involves the alignment of mentors' identities with their protégés as they reach out to others and engage in their respective roles.

An identity perspective is relevant to sponsorship in the context of cross-race mentorship and in particular for African American protégés for several reasons. African Americans have historically been subject to attributions of lower task competence and lower status and continue to experience bias and outsider status in many organizations (Webster & Rashotte, 2010; York & Cornwell, 2006). This introduces identity-related challenges for African Americans seeking to increase career opportunities involving access to influential networks and high levels of organizations that have traditionally been dominated by whites (e.g., Chanland & Murphy, 2018). Minority protégés often perceive identity-related barriers to initiating cross-race mentoring relationships (Hu, Thomas, & Lance, 2008), and status differences further complicate identity concerns arising from demographic differences between these individuals (e.g., Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009).

Finally, mentors are likely to approach cross-race relationships involving African American protégés with heightened awareness of the identity differences involved in these relationships and the need to overcome the barriers and stereotypes that such identities elicit (Blake-Beard, 1999; Lankau, Riordan, & Thomas, 2005; Ragins, 1997). Even when there is a sincere desire for interaction across racial lines, there often are concerns about conveying intentions effectively, such as a fear of offending the protégé (cf., Goncalo, Chatman, Duguid, & Kennedy, 2015). Considering how identity is involved in cross-race sponsorship involving African American protégés allows us to understand the ways in which demographically different mentors and protégés can work together to increase career opportunities as well as the impact of mentor-protégé interactions on others in the workplace. By advancing theory about the processes involved in sponsorship as well as the identity-related challenges that both mentors and protégés face and how these challenges might be minimized, our work provides deep insight into how sponsorship in mentoring relationships might improve career advancement opportunities, and in particular for African American protégés.

The Relationship Between Sponsorship and Career Advancement

Because sponsorship is intended to create exposure and visibility for protégés (Baranik, Roling, & Eby, 2010), sponsorship is likely to increase career advancement for protégés of all races. Protégés who are recipients of sponsorship receive advocacy and access to networks that pave the way for career advancement beyond what is possible by virtue of talent and performance alone (Ibarra et al., 2010; Paddison, 2013). Sponsors ensure that protégés are considered for positions that may not officially exist or that protégés did not know about, which creates additional opportunities that increase protégés' career advancement (Hewlett et al., 2010).

These career advancement effects of sponsorship are likely to be especially strong for African American protégés in cross-race pairs. This is because majority members of organizations often have access to informal networks and opportunities from which African Americans have historically tended to be excluded (Cox & Nkomo, 1986; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998; Smith, 2002). African American protégés in cross-race pairs are particularly able to realize career advancement gains as a result of sponsorship since they often face unconscious biases and hindering institutionalized power structures (Roberts, Mayo, Ely, & Thomas, 2018; Thomas, 2001; Tourse et al., 2018). Cross-race mentors are positioned to help African American protégés overcome these biases and power structures via career-advancing benefits such as access, advocacy, and privilege that are not as available to African American mentors (Spalter-Roth, Shin, Mayorova, & White, 2013).

Engaging in cross-race mentorship that recognizes, supports, and develops African American professionals in their pursuit of career objectives also contributes to resilience, which can allow protégés to progress toward career advancement even in the face of the difficult obstacles that African Americans face at work (Roberts et al., 2018). While same-race mentoring of African Americans holds the potential for offering unique and important psychosocial benefits, these psychosocial benefits do not necessarily result in improved career outcomes (Eby et al., 2013; Ehrhart & Ragins, 2019). African American mentors in same-race pairs who work toward achieving career advancement for protégés are often more likely than other mentors to be seen as overemphasizing the value of diversity or being motivated by an agenda that has not been helpful to the organization, even in a somewhat diversity-friendly organization (Hekman, Johnson, DerFoo, & Yang, 2016). Further, African American protégés' performance is likely to be under increased scrutiny, and if they fail in their new role, the mentor's tie to the protégé will likely be recognized and it could undermine the mentor's reputation (Paddison, 2013); this reputational risk may be particularly devastating to

African American mentors who are likely to have overcome substantial barriers to achieve their current positions.

Proposition 1: Increased sponsorship efforts will be associated with higher levels of protégé career advancement, and this relationship will be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Next, we turn to the specific elements that comprise high-quality sponsorship at each phase of relationship development, in particular focusing on: developing connected identities, facilitating the legitimacy of protégé capabilities, maximizing the exchange and utilization of social capital, perspective-taking, providing new development relationships, challenging organizational norms, and offering ongoing advocacy. We propose that each of these elements of sponsorship is positively related to career advancement and that demographic dissimilarity moderates the relationship between the sponsorship elements and career advancement, thereby offering an explanation of why the proposed relationships are likely to be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Initiation of Sponsorship and Development of Connected Identities

During the initiation stage of sponsorship, mentors begin to incorporate the sponsor role as a part of the mentoring relationship and their self-definition. Initial enactments of the sponsor role are likely to be tentative and are forms of exploration of sponsorship that helps mentors make sense of who they are and who they should be as sponsors (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Similarly, protégés may begin exploring new opportunities and engaging in stretch assignments provided by the mentor that approximate roles that the protégé aspires to or by receiving coaching from the mentor intended to help prepare the protégé for the possibility of career advancement opportunities (Proudford & Washington, 2017). As protégés associate with their mentors, they are likely to begin to better understand their mentors' strengths, connections, and reputations, which are important for developing trust and ensuring that mentors have their best interests at heart. The mentor–protégé relationship also allows for feedback through cycles of “sensebreaking” and “sensegiving” (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Pratt, 2000). At the initiation stage of sponsorship, sensebreaking may occur such that protégés come to realize gaps in their current identity that are hindering career advancement. Once these gaps have been identified, the mentor can engage in coaching and sensegiving to guide “the

meaning construction” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442) efforts of the protégé to address these gaps.

During this stage, shared identities are also likely to emerge within the relationship, such that a relational identity forms (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). The concept of relational identity reflects that individuals may not simply identify with a role but may also identify with the relationship itself (c.f., Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). The relationship facilitates an identity wherein the mentor and protégé see each other in terms of their interconnected roles and friendship. Connected identities, which link mentors and protégés to each other through their role self-definitions, are likely to accentuate a mentor’s motivation to facilitate career advancement for a protégé as a result of the mentor’s instrumental motivation (as a sponsor) and supportive motivation (as an interconnected individual and friend) (Spalter-Roth et al., 2013; Thomas, 2001).

While connected identities are likely to be helpful in realizing career advancement for protégés in sponsorship relationships involving any demographic configuration, connected identities are likely to be especially helpful for African American protégés in cross-race pairs. We propose that connected identities are especially important in this context because the cross-race pair will see each other through their interconnected roles and friendship rather than through a lens that makes salient differences, biases, and stereotypes. Specifically, the salience of being from different racial groups is likely to diminish as there is a reduction in the uncertainty that otherwise is involved in such cross-demographic interactions (Brickson, 2000; Guillaume et al., 2017; Thomas, 1993).

Specific to a person’s sense of self, racial identity is the psychological internalization of a mindset that focuses on environmental and social cues (Tourse et al., 2018). Historical discrimination has ramifications for the identity and group structure of subordinate racial groups as they internalize societal views and a mindset that limits an opportunity (Tourse et al., 2018). Connected identities can help to address these psychological effects of systemic racism. For example, in many design-related professions, moving beyond entry-level positions requires an assertive expression of artistic style and one’s own creative ideas. African American protégés highly proficient at entry-level tasks may not consider themselves as candidates for advancement in such a setting, given a lack of historical encouragement in their organization for such pursuits among their identity group. A protégé in this situation is likely to benefit from a sponsor’s recognition of their artistic talent, and as the sponsor draws attention to the creative expressions contributed by the protégé, a connected identity develops as a result of sensebreaking and sensegiving. This may open up the protégé’s mind to consider new opportunities for

advancement and the exercise of these talents, leading ultimately to identity development that incorporates advanced positions.

We argue that the importance of this deeper level of connection that arises from the development of relational identities is also important for these relationships beyond the dyad level. As mentors introduce and incorporate the protégé in their network, the parties begin to see each other as part of a larger common in-group. This is especially important for African American protégés within cross-race mentorship because it helps the mentor and protégé to overcome some of the preferences for others from one's in-group that arise from intergroup bias (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009). For example, the mentor may start to see the protégé as sharing a common broader in-group identity related to the collective of professionals within the organization (i.e., seeing the protégé as being "one of us") and focus less on differences related to racial group memberships (Dovidio et al., 2009; Linehan & Scullion, 2008).

As common in-group identities develop, individuals are also more likely to adopt "more positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral orientations" toward each other (Gaertner, Dovidio, Guerra, Hehman, & Saguy, 2016, p. 437). The interconnected quality of relational identities and increased positive orientation involved in common in-group identities are likely to assist with protégé career advancement to facilitate a better understanding of protégé strengths and aspirations and encouraging helping behaviors toward protégés who otherwise might be seen as out-group members (Dovidio, Gaertner, Shnabel, Saguy, & Johnson, 2010; Weinberg, 2019). These qualities thus will be especially beneficial in cross-race mentorship involving African American protégés due to reducing barriers resulting from racial dissimilarity that hinders career advancement.

As a result of developing connected identities, African American protégés are also more likely to develop comfort with temporally future aspirational roles in cross-race mentoring relationships as they work to replace perceptions of exclusion from informal organizational networks (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019). Specifically, African American protégés may begin to view aspirational roles in ways that are less impacted by their experiences in the past and more influenced by their hopes and expectations for the future. This time-dependent process benefits from the mentor's sensegiving so that new identities can take root and grow over time (George & Jones, 2000), thus helping the protégé become better prepared for career advancement. These sensegiving efforts offer a form of social validation, providing the momentum that encourages continued identity exploration and deepening one's commitment to the new identity features involved in career advancement (Rogers, Corley, & Ashforth, 2017). Although similar processes are well documented for professional identities with

long socialization periods (e.g., medicine) (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) and the adoption of new organizational identities (i.e., an organization changes its identity) (e.g., Foreman & Parent, 2008), they have received little attention in the context of adoption of a new professional identity within mentorship of African Americans involving career advancement.

Proposition 2: The development of connected identities that link mentors and protégés through their sponsor roles will be positively related to protégé career advancement, and this effect will be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Identity Cultivation

The cultivation stage of sponsorship involves the mentor and protégé further developing mentor and protégé identities. In this stage, protégés are able to realize career advancement when: (1) mentors facilitate the perceived legitimacy of protégés' capabilities and qualifications, (2) mentors and protégés maximize the exchange and utilization of social capital, and 3) mentors endorse protégés for specific career opportunities through perspective-taking. We discuss these next.

Capability and qualification legitimization. Mentors engaging in sponsorship help protégés make sense of their new identities when they indicate that a protégé's capabilities and qualifications warrant career advancement and provide opportunities to demonstrate this publicly before influential others in the organization (Hewlett et al., 2010). Through this support extended from a mentor to a protégé, a deeper identity-based connection is established, and the value of the protégé's capabilities and strength of their qualifications are more easily recognized and seen as legitimate by others who can offer career advancement to the protégé. For example, when a mentor solicits an invitation for the protégé to attend an executive planning meeting based on the protégé's capabilities and qualifications, supports the protégé's contributions in the meeting, and later confirms the protégé's ability to a hiring manager who sees potential in the protégé, these activities demonstrate the mentor's commitment to the sponsor role. Doing so requires the mentor to align more strongly with the protégé than is the case when merely providing an introduction and allows others to begin to assess the protégé's career advancement potential for themselves (Proudford & Washington, 2017). Thus, mentors who facilitate the perceived legitimacy of protégés' capabilities and qualifications improve career advancement for protégés of any race.

However, having capabilities and qualifications legitimized is especially valuable to African American protégés who may have previously been overlooked as candidates for high-level positions by influential others due to bias or latent forms of discrimination (Carton & Rosette, 2011). Sponsorship helps African Americans to be seen less in terms of negative stereotypes that others might consciously or subconsciously hold and contributes to new contacts feeling more trust and interest in their capabilities (Proudford & Washington, 2017). This process of legitimization is important not only because it facilitates protégés being more visible to influential others, but also because it helps to provide additional confidence and validation as they navigate their own often complex identity dynamics (cf., Minefee, Rabelo, Stewart, & Young, 2018; Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014).

When protégés experience their capabilities and qualifications as being perceived as legitimate, they may be able to be more authentic in enacting their identity and allow others to see them as they see themselves (Cable & Kay, 2012). This connection between being seen as legitimate and enacting one's identity authentically is especially relevant to African American protégés. Feeling legitimized by their cross-race mentor reduces the likelihood that African American protégés will take on an inauthentic and perhaps highly uncomfortable identity in order to fit in among influential decision makers who are demographically dissimilar. The latter could be considered as a form of *passing*, defined as “a cultural performance whereby one member of a defined social group masquerades as another in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group” (Leary, 1999, p. 85). Passing in this manner is a form of identity negotiation as individuals from underrepresented groups such as African Americans routinely face pressure to de-emphasize or hide parts of their identities and assimilate to white cultural norms (DeJordy, 2008; Reid, 2015; Slay & Smith, 2011). In the extreme, lighter-skinned African Americans may attempt to hide their racial identity altogether, whereas others may de-emphasize what they believe to be stereotypical aspects of their identity as an impression management technique in order to avoid stigmatization, discrimination, and social exclusion (Roberts, 2005). For example, African American protégés might talk about their experiences getting an MBA, rather than highlighting the leadership roles they had in a historically Black fraternity or sorority, anticipating that majority members in the organization might not perceive such affiliations as prestigious or in the same positive light as other African Americans. Although deemphasizing elements of one's identity can be a tactic used to shield the self from harm, it can disengage and destroy the self it intends to protect, resulting in feelings of isolation at work (Reid, 2015). It can also adversely affect the individual's psychological well-being by serving to “perpetuate the experiences of fear,

which may have contributed to the decision to pass originally” (DeJordy, 2008, p. 515).

By contrast, when individuals in cross-race encounters are able to demonstrate their capabilities and qualifications with the backing of the mentor, both mentor and protégé are able to realize identity authenticity and facilitated information processing on the way to accomplishing career advancement goals (West, Magee, Gordon, & Gullett, 2014). Authentic self-disclosure and engagement of one’s full self improve the quality of these organizational relationships such that there will be increased support needed in pursuit of career advancement (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; Weinberg, 2019). Through these interactions, both mentors and protégés engage in joint sensemaking, which allows protégés to see themselves as legitimate, engage their full self, and progress toward career advancement goals bypassing the adverse effects involved in adopting an inauthentic identity (Weick, 1995).

When mentors lend their reputation and provide legitimacy to a protégé in order to place that protégé in an advantageous position, this is an example of a high level of role identity commitment vis-a-vis the protégé (cf., Powell & Baker, 2014). The mentor’s identity helps to open doors to opportunities that otherwise might have remained closed to the protégé without the mentor’s endorsement. The mentor engages in risk when endorsing protégés for specific career opportunities, and a mentor’s strong role identity commitment indicates a willingness to take on this risk (Holt, Markova, Dhaenens, Marler, & Heilmann, 2016). As an important extension of prior views, we make note of the potential risks both parties incur in engaging in cross-race sponsorship activities as the identities of mentor and protégé become enmeshed; surprisingly, little has been documented about the reputation risks that the protégé may incur. The protégé is able to take risks related to career advancement (e.g., applying for a highly competitive job) as a result of a mentor’s endorsement (Dwivedi, Joshi, & Misangyi, 2018). The mentor’s reputation is impacted by that of the protégé (e.g., Proudford & Washington, 2017), but given their initially limited exposure to the mentor’s valued networks, the protégé may not be privy to such knowledge. Because cross-race sponsorship is so visible, associating with a mentor whose reputation is in any way tainted can be catastrophic for the protégé and so there is vulnerability to the newly adopted relational identity. In rare cases, sponsorship may actually stifle professional growth when a mentor’s poor decisions or a scandal influence others’ impressions of the protégé. Yet, at a high level of role identity commitment, both mentors and protégés are fully engaged in their roles working toward the goal of increasing protégé career advancement through endorsements for specific career opportunities.

Proposition 3: Mentors facilitating the perceived legitimacy of protégés' capabilities and qualifications will be positively related to career advancement for protégés, and this relationship will be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Exchange and utilization of social capital. In order to realize career advancement goals, mentors in sponsorship relationships exchange social capital with protégés and leverage network connections. Social capital has been defined as resources that help in the accomplishment of goals and is recognized as being located in the networks of individuals (Burt, 2000; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The exchange of social capital between a protégé and mentor is a means of maximizing protégé career advancement. The mentor's network is where a key source for protégé career advantage lies (Son & Lin, 2012). However, relationships in a network are not sufficient to ensure career advancement. To leverage the relationships in the network such that resources and opportunities result from it, social capital can be exchanged between a protégé and mentor through interactions with one another.

For example, by building trust and understanding (relational and cognitive forms of social capital) about the form that career advancement steps might take, network connections can be approached more effectively (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Social capital includes skills pertaining to accessing resources; a protégé could utilize these skills to leverage the mentor's connections toward accomplishing career advancement (c.f., Van Buren & Hood, 2011). In turn, the protégé may have relationships and expertise that could be provided to the mentor as a form of social capital that ultimately could be shared with the mentor's connections as well. For example, a senior manager might be having problems in gaining broad support for an initiative and benefit by tapping into the protégé's perspective regarding how to better frame and implement the change to garner more support. Furthermore, for protégés to fully realize the structural advantages of a mentor's social capital, they must engage in network utilization or actions to leverage network connections toward career advancement goals (Khattab, van Knippenberg, Pieterse, & Hernandez, 2020). Thus, overall, mentors and protégés of all demographic configurations can improve career advancement for protégés by maximizing the exchange and utilization of social capital.

Historically, influential networks in organizations have tended to include few minority members making it difficult for African Americans to access membership and the resources these networks provide (Combs, 2003). A lack of access to informal networks is considered to be a key reason why African Americans are underrepresented in upper management positions (Mehra et al.,

1998). Researchers have observed that racial minorities' networks tend not to be very advantageous to career advancement (e.g., James, 2000) and have characteristics that result in lower levels of trust and poorer communication (Ibarra, 1992). Racial minorities also tend to draw upon different individuals for career and psychosocial needs and report having weaker social capital in organizations (James, 2000; Konrad, Seidel, Lo, Bhardwaj, & Qureshi, 2017).

However, trying to create the same kinds of networks as advantaged majority members has not proven to be beneficial for African American protégé career advancement. For example, nonwhites do not necessarily increase career mobility as much as their white counterparts do by increasing network range (Ibarra, 1995). However, a mentor may be helpful for advancing protégés' careers by lending social capital to the protégé, facilitating connections in the mentor's network to see the protégé as credible and worthy of extending friendship and career opportunities (c.f., Burt, 2000). A mentor bestows network legitimacy on a protégé through explicit efforts at signaling the protégé's value and worthiness of association, which increases the likelihood that individuals in the mentor's network will accept the protégé into their network after initial introductions. This is likely especially important for African American protégés who might have less in common with the predominantly white members of a network and for whom initial interactions might be somewhat strained by more senior members of the organization's lack of existing friendships and ties with other African Americans. Although the mentor's network may be somewhat homogenous, based on these positive network effects, individuals in the mentor's network will increasingly see the protégé as part of the common in-group associated with their informal social network and will see the African American protégé as less of an outsider over time, thus increasing the protégé's positioning for career advantage (Dwivedi et al., 2018).

Thus, the exchange of social capital between protégé and mentor is especially beneficial for African American protégés in cross-race pairs as a means of maximizing protégé career advancement. Minorities have been found to be able to access higher status individuals through cross-race contacts (Son & Lin, 2012), which highlights the career advancement benefits that can accrue to a protégé as the result of a mentor's network. Moreover, for an African American protégé to truly access the career advancement benefits of a cross-race mentor, it is essential that the contacts in a mentor's network are leveraged or utilized (Khattab et al., 2020). Since minorities tend to underutilize their networks due to fears of rejection and a low level of confidence that network utilization will reap rewards, the support of a white mentor is likely to be particularly helpful for African American protégés to overcome these obstacles (Khattab et al., 2020). Further, there may be an expectation on

the part of the mentor that the protégé will follow-up on provided connections leading to network utilization and ultimately to further career advancement for the protégé.

Proposition 4: Mentors and protégés maximizing their exchange and utilization of social capital will be positively related to protégé career advancement opportunities, and this relationship will be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Perspective-taking and endorsing protégés for specific career opportunities. To endorse a protégé effectively for specific opportunities, the mentor must work to fully understand the career development goals of the protégé. Mentors become more familiar with the protégé's positive personal qualities, skills, and expertise when they engage in a discovery process that allows for a compelling narrative regarding the individual's ability to contribute to the organization (Hewlett et al., 2010). This requires both advocacy and a high level of proficiency and effort in perspective-taking (defined as the recognition of knowledge, values, meanings, assumptions, and beliefs from a different community; Mohrman, Gibson, & Mohrman, 2001). Perspective-taking is necessary because different communities subjectively evaluate opportunities and decision junctures in terms of their own vantage point (Ku, Wang, & Galinsky, 2015). Mentors who practice perspective-taking in a meaningful way are likely to contribute more to protégé career advancement because they are better able to identify and endorse career opportunities that are in line with the protégé's identity preference (dual identity or otherwise). When mentors engage in the process of discovering protégés' interests, capabilities, and goals as a part of the sponsorship process, mentors are better able to promote protégés and their talents to others in order to facilitate career advancement. In particular, the mentor may be likely to look beyond career opportunities on the immediate horizon (which entail only incremental advancement such as to frontline supervision) to advocate the protégé for more advanced roles with even greater responsibility (e.g., middle management or project lead roles), which are more visible to senior leaders in the organization. It is through demonstrating proficiency in these roles that the most substantial career advancement is made possible.

While mentors' perspective-taking with protégés is likely to increase career advancement for protégés from any demographic group, we expect this relationship to be increased in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés. Even though mentors in same-race pairs involving African American protégés may be likely to engage in perspective-taking with ease, it

also has been demonstrated that underrepresented others may not engage in advocacy for similar others out of concern for retaining their standing in their work groups and organizations (Duguid, Loyd, & Tolbert, 2012); thus, same-race pairs may not result in the career advancement gains one might expect.

For African American protégés in cross-race mentoring pairs, the perspective-taking discovery process is enabled by the role-based structure of a sponsorship-focused relationship, which allows them to get past the tentativeness and insecurity that stereotype threat (pressure to disconfirm stereotypes about one's group) otherwise might induce in a cross-race relationship (Roberson & Kulik, 2007; Swann, 1987). Moreover, a discovery process allows for further development of friendship as individuals (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002) as well as relational and common in-group identities. Extending prior perspectives, we argue that this likely entails interaction both inside and outside the organization (e.g., at social or family gatherings), so that the lives of the mentor and protégé become even more interconnected, encouraging a more candid understanding of each other. This is likely to result in the suppression of negative stereotypes as individuals have been found to rely less on stereotypes when they are provided with reliable information about individuals, which occur within the role expectations of engaging in sponsorship activities (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

During the discovery process, a mentor might initially think that an African American protégé's goals are clear, but they may evolve alongside changes in the identities of both the mentor and protégé during their relationship. At first, the mentor might unconsciously adhere to an expectation that an African American protégé should assimilate and adopt particular behaviors and approaches that have worked well for themselves (Guthrie & Jones, 2017). This is a possible stalling point for a cross-race mentorship relationship because mentors might not have faced the same challenges that African American protégés face in their careers (Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner, & Sabino, 2011). One of the main struggles for learning in cross-race mentoring is the mentor's and protégé's mindsets toward diversity; research has shown that mentors in these relationships contribute to both psychosocial functions and career improvement when both individuals share complementary perspectives and strategies for handling racial disparities (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002). In addition, even well-intentioned mentors tend to assume that a single identity (e.g., one's organizational role or profession) is the primary focus for individuals as other identities (e.g., white male) might not be salient because they are shared by the majority of organizational members. This occurs despite evidence suggesting that minorities tend to prefer a dual identity wherein they simultaneously identify with a subgroup identity (e.g., African American) (Dovidio et al., 2009). Thus, it may be beneficial for cross-

race mentor relationships to work toward developing a plan for how a dual identity can be realized and navigated in settings, such as boardrooms, in which a single identity model has been the norm.

Perspective-taking is particularly important within sponsorship for racial minorities such as African Americans with dual identities because evidence suggests that holding a dual identity may pose challenges, including tension and self-doubt (e.g., [Ellemers & Rink, 2005](#)). For example, African Americans can face dual identity expectations involved in taking charge in higher-level leadership positions while facing demands related to appearing friendly and not overly aggressive in order to avoid negative stereotypes that others might hold about African Americans (c.f., [Carton & Rosette, 2011](#)). A mentor who engages in perspective-taking when engaging in sponsorship can be helpful in navigating these tensions and, in doing so, can better identify and endorse the protégé for a broader range of desirable career opportunities rather than assuming that the mentor's own career path is desired by the protégé.

Proposition 5: Mentors' perspective-taking with protégés will be positively associated with protégé career advancement, and this relationship is likely to be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Separation: Identity Shifting

In the separation stage of sponsorship, identity shifting is likely for both the mentor and protégé. Protégés benefit from connections with new mentors who can act as sponsors with different networks, which require the original mentors to shift their identity as a mentor to a specific protégé in a new direction ([Humberd & Rouse, 2016](#)). The original mentor could directly or indirectly be the conduit to new mentors, for example. In addition, protégés may become insiders themselves and therefore benefit from new developmental relationships. Also relevant to identity shifting is how the needs of protégés may change over time, such as when a protégé outgrows the need for a specific mentor or becomes more accomplished or influential than the mentor (e.g., [De Janasz, Sullivan, & Whiting, 2003](#)). Thus, these identity shifting scenarios suggest that mentors who broker new development relationships for their protégés will help to realize improved protégé career advancement.

There are both bias and identity considerations pertinent to these scenarios that suggest that mentors who broker new development relationships for African American protégés will be especially helpful in realizing career advancement outcomes. As mentors come to realize the achievements of their

protégés, their own status and identity as a mentor may be in jeopardy. As the protégé's career threatens to eclipse the mentor's career accomplishments, the mentor may even struggle with latent feelings that the protégé should remain in a subservient or less influential position to their mentor. As a result, the mentor may refrain from further action that contributes to a change in the power balance in the relationship and inadvertently may fail to help advance the career of the protégé (Crary, 2017). For example, a mentor might not approach a contact to convince them to offer an opportunity to the protégé but would still continue to have coffee with the protégé without consciously recognizing that potentially helpful activities were not undertaken. Thus, there may be a level of unconscious bias—involving demographic differences as well as status differences that are more pronounced in cross-race sponsorship—entailed in not seeking out developmental opportunities for a protégé (c.f., Van Dijk & Van Engen, 2013).

Another concern related to identity shifting for protégés from all demographic groups is structuring a mentoring relationship to include a natural demarcation for the end of the sponsorship-related activities, such as career advancement to a particular stage. Indeed, a challenge that has been discussed in the mentorship literature is that there can be a lack of clarity about when a mentorship relationship has run its course (De Janasz et al., 2003). Mentorship relationships may end due to geographic changes, protégé growth, or the relationships might evolve into a deeper friendship (Humberd & Rouse, 2016). Given that, sponsorship is intended to result in career advancement and is less focused on interpersonal considerations, the separation stage when sponsorship is involved should be clearer relative to mentoring relationships that do not involve sponsorship. The focus on career achievement in sponsorship provides clarity in terms of when the mentor has been successful in supporting and assisting the protégé.

A defined separation stage in a sponsorship relationship is likely to be particularly beneficial for African American protégés in cross-race pairs. Without a defined separation stage, there may be sensitivity within a cross-race sponsorship relationship about not being adequately loyal or appreciative by transitioning away from the existing relationship (Thomas, 2001). Thus, African American protégés may be more at risk of having their development and career advancement progress curtailed when a separation stage is not well-defined in advance. By having a defined separation stage, the African American protégé has a completion goal to strive for and achieve. African American protégés who achieve career advancement opportunities as a result of sponsorship realize especially clear benefits from a defined separation stage from being a sponsored protégé in order to allow for time to act as a mentor themselves or to connect with new sponsors who could open doors that otherwise might not be available for yet higher career attainments.

Proposition 6: Mentors' provision of new development relationships for protégés and a defined separation stage are positively related to career advancement for protégés, and this relationship will be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Expansion of Sponsor Effects Through Organizational Norm Challenging

As a result of engaging in sponsorship, a mentor may become aware of individuals or organizational norms that serve as systemic barriers to protégé advancement (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). The mentorship roles one assumes and how one engages in sponsorship may shift due to this awareness to include speaking up and challenging norms, such as undermining and discriminatory language that can pervade interactions and negatively influence career opportunities for individuals from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., O'Brien, 2016). In the specific instance of mentoring African American protégés, mentors' identities also can be redefined to include challenging norms in order to alter ways of including and developing African Americans in the workplace. For example, mentors can create conditions in which one's protégé as well as others can feel welcome by modeling behavior that provides an environment conducive to career advancement for African Americans, engaging in inquiry about creating inclusion in order to involve others in joint problem solving and enabling small wins toward a more inclusive culture (Grant & Patil, 2012).

Mentors engaging in sponsorship are also likely to be proactive in countering organization-wide exclusion as they focus on advancing career trajectories and overcoming barriers to success beyond a specific protégé (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016). For example, this might include negating others' efforts to render protégés invisible, disrupting efforts to presume that all African Americans have uniform experiences and increasing awareness about the lack of African Americans in senior corporate roles (Holder et al., 2015) with obvious benefits for the protégé. When the status hierarchy is challenged in such ways, African Americans are more comfortable leveraging their networks to help their careers, thus increasing career advancement attainments further (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019; Khattab et al., 2020). The mentor may also benefit by, for instance, experiencing career revitalization as a result of projecting confidence and taking a leadership role in countering exclusion (Young & Perrewe, 2000). Sponsors' efforts in challenging racial stereotypes have the potential to impact the career advancement of African Americans throughout the organization, thus creating a broader positive effect that extends beyond their protégé.

Mentors also can challenge organizational norms by communicating with colleagues who have engaged in racial microaggressions, which are subtle everyday experiences of racism (Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014). By acting as an ally to African Americans in their workplace who have encountered racial microaggressions, mentors help to reduce future microaggression incidents that African American employees otherwise would devote energy toward in ways that reduce their effectiveness at work (Wong et al., 2014). When distractions associated with microaggressions are minimized, African American protégés are able to perform more fully to their potential allowing for stronger engagement with key career advancement opportunities (Holder et al., 2015).

Proposition 7: Mentors' challenging of organizational norms and practices that adversely impact protégés is positively related to protégé career advancement, and this relationship is stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Perceptions of Sponsorship by Other Organizational Members

When sponsorship of individuals from any demographic group is perceived by others to involve favoritism, the career advancement benefits of the sponsorship arrangement are less likely. This is because mentors whose efforts are seen to be lacking in fairness are likely to alter their behavior and/or to be less effective as mentors such that there is less career advancement for protégés (c.f., Ramarajan & Reid, 2020).

In situations in which those from underrepresented groups are primarily being selected as protégés, identity threat may accompany perceptions that sponsorship is only granted to individuals from these groups. Sponsorship is intended to provide deserved advantage to protégés. However, individuals not benefitting from sponsorship may perceive inequity (Roberson & Stevens, 2006) and not perceive the benefits of sponsorship to racial minorities.

Sponsorship efforts will tend to be successful and less divisive if they are perceived to be part of an ongoing developmental mentoring relationship rather than involving expedited job placement that may be seen as being politically motivated. This allows for genuine and subtle career advancement assistance and an accurate assessment and understanding of the protégé and their fit with the position or opportunity for which a protégé is being considered. It is especially important for cross-race mentors of African American protégés who advocate based on merit to be perceived as fair so their actions will tend to be seen as earned and less likely to trigger identity threats, thus avoiding stalls in the mentor–protégé relationship. In contrast, mentors who

instead advocate for underqualified individuals solely based on race will trigger a sense of reverse discrimination if their sponsorship efforts are successful.

Proposition 8: Mentors' ongoing advocacy based on protégé merits will be positively related to career advancement for protégés, and this relationship will be stronger in cross-race pairs involving African American protégés than in demographically similar pairs.

Discussion

We extend theory on mentoring diverse individuals in organizations by specifying the identity work involved in these relationships. First, through an examination of identity-related challenges, we extend theory on mentoring and identity to delineate the processes that unfold over time in cross-race sponsorship, the development of personal, relational, and common in-group identities, and the exchange and utilization of social capital. Our theorizing extends prior approaches by depicting the sponsorship role of mentoring as a mechanism by which mentors come to see protégés as individuals seeking career achievement rather than being blinded by stereotypes, biases, and the uncertainty involved in interactions across racial boundaries.

Second, we also provide a deeper understanding of dual identity concerns via perspective-taking that are relevant to sponsorship as well as greater understanding of identity shifting and redefining that likely to occur in the process of achieving protégé career advancement. We illustrate how these relationships are likely to apply to the specific instance of cross-race sponsorship of African American protégés.

Third, we elucidate how career advancement opportunities in organizations may be achieved through sponsorship in dyadic mentoring relationships and that such a focus is likely to exceed that achieved without the inclusion of such efforts, such as those that attend primarily to psychosocial needs. Our theorizing highlights the need for sponsorship in mentoring relationships and argues that increased attention to career advancement is particularly beneficial to African Americans.

In summary, our unique approach to sponsorship, which incorporates an identity perspective and integrates the mentoring, identity, and diversity literatures, allows us to develop theory regarding how sponsorship unfolds and how sponsorship for African American protégés is an especially useful approach for career advancement for this underrepresented group. This approach advances our theoretical understanding of the interdependencies in dyadic relationships (Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2007) in the context of

sponsorship and expands our grasp of sponsorship as a part of mentorship, which provides a better understanding of how sponsorship relates to mentorship as a whole (cf., Cropanzano, Preher, & Chen, 2002).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could test the ideas proposed above. For most of the constructs in our model, there are published measures with demonstrated validity. This is true for sponsorship (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), connected identities (relational identity and common in-group identity) (Amiot, Terry, & McKimmie, 2012; Wang, Owens, Li, & Shi, 2018), social capital (Seibert et al., 2001), and perspective-taking (Lee & Kang, 2020). Protégé career advancement has been objectively measured with promotions received; supervisor ratings of career advancement prospects also have been used in published research (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). For variables for which there are no currently validated measures (e.g., challenging organizational norms and on-going advocacy based on protégé merits), best practices for validating new measures are delineated by Hinkin (1998).

A new measure of sponsorship could also be developed. Seibert et al.'s (2001) sponsorship measure extracted sponsorship-related items from Dreher and Ash's (1990) global mentoring scale. The extracted items are not part of a subscale and focus on recommending a protégé for assignments rather than creating opportunities. A newly developed scale could incorporate items that depict sponsorship as being more proactive through the specific sponsorship behaviors represented in Figure 1.

In addition, our theory development offers guidance for future research in several areas. To start, future research could test our propositions. We acknowledge that finding a sufficient sample size to include both cross-race and same-race mentorship pairs in the same study could be challenging, but such an endeavor would be valuable to better understand the differences. This line of inquiry would help to reconcile mixed empirical research findings about the relative advantages and disadvantages of cross-race mentorship compared with same-race mentorship (e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996; Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Thomas, 1990; Underhill, 2006). While operationalizing identity constructs, such as common in-group identity, might seem difficult, there are precedents for assessing identity in survey-based studies (e.g., Amiot et al., 2012), and qualitative research may be especially helpful to uncover less well understood dynamics involved in cross-race sponsorship.

Additionally, research on mentoring, sponsorship, and career success often suggests that these processes are not substantially different for those from different demographic groups (e.g., Judge, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Bretz,

2004; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Seibert et al., 2001). As we have shown, using an identity lens can help to develop more fine-grained approaches, which likely have even greater potential to address the underlying needs of African American protégés. For example, African American protégés involved in sponsorship may place varying degrees of emphasis on identity enhancement oriented to personal identity (wanting to do well for one's self), relational identity (wanting to do well to reflect well on the mentor), and collective identity (wanting to do well to reflect well on others from one's racial group) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), and this might change over time as their mentoring relationships evolve. Our theory development suggests that it would be fruitful to examine the relative emphasis on these different forms of identity enhancement within sponsorship. Doing so could provide guidance about where mentors' attention should be focused to increase career advancement. In addition, future research could extend our theorizing by applying a level of analysis lens on sponsorship to elucidate further how individual-, dyadic-, and group-level processes differ from one another.

Our theory development also provides insights into future avenues for diversity research. While sponsorship signals a focus on facilitating protégés' career advancement, our theory development indicates that when mentors and protégés discuss the identity-related nuances of protégés' career aspirations and expectations, it may help the protégé to feel respected, contributing to psychological well-being that underpins career advancement. Future research might explore when open discussions between mentor and protégé about race are beneficial to realizing career advancement goals. Similarly, research might look at whether or not cultivating a climate that utilizes diversity to inform work processes (i.e., engagement diversity climate) allows mentors to better understand the specific ways that demographic differences add value and provide more meaning to their sponsorship efforts as they advocate for protégés (Hajro, Gibson, & Pudenko, 2017). Conducting such research would extend prior work on diversity climates by identifying a specific means (i.e., sponsorship relationships) by which climates impact outcomes for underrepresented groups in organizations. It will also be important for future research to examine the specific ways in which the cross-sponsorship dynamics we propose are different from and similar to sponsorship that crosses other demographic boundaries, such as gender and culture.

Extending and complementing our temporal approach, future research might also consider how sponsorship of African Americans and other underrepresented groups is evolving in organizations. For example, this research could consider how in today's era of mobility and shorter tenures, career advancement efforts involving sponsorship might occur across organizational boundaries and involve protégés leaving the organization in order to pursue

opportunities at a new organization with the help of well-connected mentors inside and outside of the organization (Scully, Blake-Beard, Felicio, & O'Neill, 2017). Further development of how individuals in positions of privilege can serve as allies to African Americans in ways that work in concert with or independent from sponsorship as a cross-race mechanism for increasing career advancement of African Americans is also encouraged (Droogendyk, Wright, Lubensky, & Loui, 2016; Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). In addition, future research could consider how identity dynamics in informal versus formal mentorship differ and the speed with which career advancement is achieved in these two relationship forms. While informal cross-race mentorship has been associated with improved career outcomes for minority protégés (Underhill, 2006), there may be informal network barriers that impede the formation of advantageous cross-race informal mentoring pairings (Combs, 2003). Particularly in the advent of sponsorship across organizational boundaries, formalizing such an approach is likely to add legitimacy to the practice. We could envision industry groups or professional associations engaging in a formal sponsorship program across organizations that would benefit the entire extended network within the industry or association.

A final area of future research informed by our theory pertains to career advancement. High-potential minorities tend to have developed one set of relationships with fellow minorities who provide psychosocial support and a different set of relationships with majority members who hold the potential of providing career-related resources (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007; Ibarra, 1995). However, as more African Americans and other minorities gain access to high-level positions, it will be important for future research to consider how same-race sponsorship involving African Americans might differ from cross-race sponsorship in improving career advancement opportunities (c.f., Brands & Mehra, 2019). This research might also explore how minorities might act as gatekeepers and exclude or open the door for other minorities (e.g., Brink & Benschop, 2014). In doing so, it could consider related challenges, such as the perception individuals might hold of losing their status as more minority members advance in their careers.

Practical Implications

Our work suggests that organizations should be more proactive in promoting sponsorship. This is especially true for those organizations that are seeking to achieve greater diversity in the upper echelons of their organization through mentoring efforts. In implementing these efforts, our theory suggests that it will be important to designate mentoring relationships as being purposefully inclusive of sponsorship so that mentors' and protégés' roles are clarified and

protégés are able to fully realize career advancement goals. Sponsorship allows organizations to facilitate career advancement across demographic boundaries that otherwise may be plagued by bias, access barriers, stereotypes, and stereotype threat. Our work highlights specific practices that could become the focus of training for mentors seeking to incorporate sponsorship into their mentoring efforts: legitimizing protégés' capabilities and qualifications, maximizing the exchange and utilization of social capital, and endorsing protégés for specific career opportunities.

Our theory also suggests that sponsorship should be guided by considerations besides demographic similarity or relational compatibility between mentors and protégés. Mentors' ability to serve as effective conduits between protégés and others with potential opportunities for the protégé is even more critical. This highlights the need to recognize and reward mentors who engage in these activities, to manage how mentors are perceived by others in the organization, and to cultivate sponsorship-friendly organizational climates.

We also provide insights into how sponsorship might facilitate relationships between African Americans and executives who have traditionally struggled or been somewhat awkward in their efforts to develop such relationships. Our theory suggests that in the presence of mentors who are acting as sponsors, other prospective mentors are likely to be more comfortable and effective in building cross-race relationships with African Americans for the purpose of sponsorship. For example, mentors might help to facilitate relationships for executives who are interested in gleaned insights and feedback from diverse perspectives.

Further, sponsorship holds the potential for achieving a multiplicative impact regarding facilitating diverse talent in organizations. As mentors achieve sponsorship success and perceive the benefits their organizations accrue as a result of their efforts, mentors may become more committed to being advocates for diversity such that they encourage others to engage in sponsorship while also continuing to engage as sponsors themselves. As mentors engaging in sponsorship beget more mentors engaging in sponsorship, the reach and potential impact of sponsorship is extended to more individuals with benefits to organizations as well as to protégés and mentors. Ultimately, our theoretical approach to understanding sponsorship and the research it encourages will provide insights into how leaders and others who influence mentoring efforts can increase diversity within management and upper echelon levels in their organizations.

Conclusion

Organizations continue to struggle to fill the void of African Americans in upper levels of management through mentor programs and diversity

initiatives. Although these initiatives have generated some positive results, there is a room for improvement, especially with respect to providing career advancement opportunities that may ultimately lead to high-level positions in organizations. In an effort to address this issue, we have added theoretical clarity to our understanding of sponsorship of African Americans within cross-race mentoring relationships, incorporating an identity perspective and elucidating the processes and challenges involved in sponsorship over time. It is our hope that these efforts will provide an important foundation for future research aimed at further clarifying these dynamics as well increasing career advancement for African Americans.

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