This study examined the association between supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggression and their subordinates’ perceived communication satisfaction, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. The findings of the 200 full-time working adults who participated in the study supported prior research indicating positive relationships between mentoring behaviors by supervisors and their subordinates’ communication satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, and negative relationships between supervisors’ verbal aggression and their subordinates’ communication satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Results of a regression analysis indicated that supervisors’ verbal aggression was a greater negative predictor of subordinates’ outcomes than was mentoring a positive predictor, supporting the presence of a negativity bias in the supervisor-subordinate relationship. Additionally, path analysis indicated that communication satisfaction fully mediated the relationship between supervisor mentoring and subordinate organizational commitment, whereas communication satisfaction served as a suppressor between mentoring and subordinate job satisfaction.

Keywords: verbal aggressiveness; mentoring; communication satisfaction; job satisfaction; organizational commitment; negativity bias

Structural changes occurring in organizations worldwide have resulted in downsizing and flattening of organizational hierarchies stifling the upward mobility of supervisors (Jackall, 1988). Subsequently, there has been a decline
in morale and loyalty by those plateaued supervisors (Scase & Goffee, 1989). This lack of upward mobility experienced by managers may result in elevated levels of frustration. Thus, the frustration and anger resulting from this limited mobility may serve as a catalyst for displays of verbal aggression from the stifled supervisors. Infante (1987) argued that trait verbal aggressiveness represents a predisposition to engage in verbal aggression, “which is latent until anger is aroused” (p. 178) by some triggering event such as the frustration experienced by supervisors who lack upward mobility.

Of course, not all organizations or supervisors react to change as highlighted above. Some supervisors assume the role of mentor to subordinates, in that mentors are committed to providing upward mobility and support to the careers of their protégés (Ragins & Scandura, 1994). Such mentoring activities have been found to improve the career development of protégés by providing sponsorship, exposure, and coaching while enhancing psychosocial development through role modeling, acceptance, confirmation, and friendship from the mentor (Kram, 1985). Prior research has also indicated that protégés of mentoring relationships reported higher levels of job satisfaction, career mobility, and increased opportunities than did their counterparts (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Scandura, 1992).

As a result, the current study sought to investigate the impact of subordinates’ perceptions of supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggressiveness on employee and organizational outcomes. Specifically, this included an examination of the impact of mentoring and verbal aggression by a supervisor on their subordinates’ communication satisfaction, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. This investigation is important to academicians and practitioners for three reasons. First, this investigation extends prior mentoring research in which the influence of communication satisfaction had been ignored; little research to date has examined the informal supervisor to subordinate mentoring relationship. Second, this study supports and extends prior verbal aggression research between supervisors and subordinates by including the influence of mentoring. The third goal of this investigation was to provide a communication lens through which to examine the existence of a negativity bias within the workplace (Rook, 1984, 1998). A negativity bias is described as a condition in which the psychological impact of negative events tends to be longer lasting and have a greater influence on a person’s state of mind than do positive events (Rook, 1984, 1998). Therefore, the effects of a verbally aggressive supervisor will likely have a greater negative impact on an employee’s well-being than would a positive event, such as
mentoring. The following literature review will offer compelling support for the current investigation.

Mentoring

Organizations are increasingly recognizing the benefits associated with mentoring relationships, in which individuals with advanced experience and knowledge provide support and facilitate the upward mobility of junior organizational members (Ragins & Scandura, 1994). Mentoring has been found to play an important role in career development by helping to provide both professional guidance and psychosocial support to employees (Baugh & Scandura, 1999; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Van Emmerik, 2004). Mentors use their experience and knowledge to further their protégé’s career and psychosocial development through behaviors, including teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counseling, and role modeling (Bey, 1995). Thus, mentoring by definition means more than teaching the protégé; the term implies a broader and longer interest in the lives of protégés. As a result, mentors and protégés experience a mutually satisfying psychosocial relationship that extends beyond the demands of the job or profession (Kram, 1985).

Prior research indicates that mentoring relationships result in a number of positive outcomes for the protégé, such as increased job satisfaction, career mobility, increased opportunities, and career satisfaction (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1989; Ragins et al., 2000; Scandura, 1992). Organizations also benefit from mentoring relationships by way of effective socialization of newcomers (Schein, 1978), enhanced productivity (Tyler, 1998), and reduced turnover (Viator & Scandura, 1991). Despite the amount of mentoring research, few studies have examined supervisors who direct subordinate mentoring relationships. However, based on prior research, one could extrapolate that a mentor-protégé relationship between a supervisor and subordinate may result in positive outcomes.

Despite the possible positive outcomes associated with mentoring, research indicates that instead of mentoring relationships in the workplace, many supervisor-subordinate relationships are plagued by verbal aggressiveness, which has been associated with a host of negative outcomes. Specifically, supervisors who are perceived as verbally aggressive are evaluated less favorably than verbally nonaggressive supervisors (Infante & Gorden, 1987), and verbal aggression has been found to be a catalyst to physical violence, relationship deterioration, and termination (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Sutter & Martin, 1998). Given that verbal
aggressiveness appears to have the opposite effects on subordinates than does mentoring, verbal aggressiveness was considered to be a negative event in our examination of a negativity bias in the workplace and will be considered in greater detail below.

Thus, mentoring by definition means more than teaching the protégé; the term implies a broader and longer interest in the lives of protégés.

Verbal Aggressiveness

Scholars have conceptualized verbal aggression as communication that attacks another person’s self-concept (Infante, 1987; Infante & Rancer, 1982, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986) and is considered to be an expression of hostility because it hurts the person(s) involved. Verbally aggressive messages include character attacks, competence attacks, physical appearance attacks, malediction, teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing, and nonverbal behaviors (Infante, 1987).

In general, verbal aggression is considered to be inherently hostile (Infante, 1995), and studies have found that verbally aggressive people are perceived less favorably with regard to social attractiveness (Martin & Anderson, 1995), friendliness and attentiveness (Kassing, Pearce, & Infante, 2000), and responsiveness (Martin & Anderson, 1996). A negative relationship between verbal aggression and liking has also been reported (Myers & Johnson, 2003). Additionally, prior research has indicated an inverse relationship between a supervisor’s use of verbal aggression and their subordinates’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Gorden & Infante, 1987; Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988; Infante & Gorden, 1985, 1987, 1991).

Organizational Commitment

One common theme that runs through most definitions of organizational commitment is the level of attachment an employee feels toward the organization. Therefore, organizational commitment is the strength of an employee’s emotional attachment to an organization and acceptance of the organization’s goals and values (Brett, Cron, & Slocum, 1995; Mowday,
Porter, & Steers, 1982; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). It is also argued that employees with a strong level of attitudinal commitment remain with the organization because they want to (Meyer & Allen, 1997). This conceptualization of organizational commitment taps into the concept examined in the present study such that employees’ attachment to or repulsion from an organization is influenced by their perceptions of their supervisor’s mentoring and/or verbal aggressiveness.

Prior research has indicated that organizational commitment has been associated with increased job performance (Cohen, 1992), reduced turnover (Cohen, 1993), and lower levels of absenteeism (Shore, Barksdale, & Shore, 1995). Of particular interest, Infante, and Gordon (1991) found that supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness was negatively related to subordinates’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Additionally, Aryee and Chay’s (1994) research indicated a positive relationship between mentoring relationships and protégés’ levels of organizational commitment.

It is important to note that organizational commitment can be differentiated from job satisfaction in that organizational commitment represents a generally stable attitude toward the organization as a whole, whereas job satisfaction represents an affective, less stable response to the specific job (Morrow, 1983; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). Thus, job satisfaction will be considered in greater detail below.

Job Satisfaction

Taylor (1970) suggested that worker satisfaction is attributed to the highest possible earnings with the least amount of fatigue. Taylor’s classical theory prompted a host of studies that revealed many other factors that contribute to one’s job satisfaction. As a result of this influx of research, a number of different ways in which to conceptualize and operationalize job satisfaction was developed (Falcione, McCroskey, & Daly, 1977). One definition of job satisfaction was based on the individual’s expectation of rewards owing to his or her behavior on the job (Jorgensen, Dunnette, & Pritchard, 1973; Vroom, 1964). From yet another perspective, Locke (1976) defined job satisfaction as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state from the appraisal of one’s job or experiences” (p. 1297). It was Locke’s conceptualization of job satisfaction that was used for the current study because this conceptualization appears to tap into attitudinal perceptions as opposed to physical determinants, such as pay.

Communication factors found to be associated with job satisfaction, include superiors’ display of nonverbal immediacy (Madlock, in press; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000), communication satisfaction (Hilgerman,
1998), effect of gender (Madlock, 2006; Serini, Toth, Wright, & Emig, 1997), superiors’ communication styles (Richmond, McCroskey, Davis, & Koontz, 1980), and mentoring (Bahniuk, Dobos, & Hill, 1990; Scandura & Williams, 2004). Moreover, strong positive relationships have been found between job satisfaction and communication satisfaction (Pettit, Goris, & Vaught, 1997), and favorable employee communication in the workplace has been shown to increase job satisfaction and employee performance (Ainspan & Dell, 2000), resulting in organizational success (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1996). Given the association between communication satisfaction and job satisfaction, communication satisfaction was of interest here and is considered in greater detail below.

Communication Satisfaction

According to Hecht (1978), communication satisfaction is a socioemotional feeling derived from positive relational interactions. Thus, employee communication satisfaction is important because it highlights a key issue for employees who assist in determining organizational effectiveness. Outcomes where employee communication satisfaction is low, include reduced employee commitment, greater absenteeism, increased industrial unrest, higher employee turnover, and reduced productivity (Hargie, Tourish, & Wilson, 2002). At an individual level, poor communication can result in increased uncertainty about situations, the self, others, or relationships, increased occupational stress, and burnout (Ray, 1993).

Communication satisfaction has received considerable attention in prior research, including its association with job satisfaction (Madlock, 2008; Pettit et al., 1997; Wheeless, Wheeless, & Howard, 1984), productivity (Clampitt & Downs, 1993), job performance (Pincus, 1986), and organizational commitment (Varona, 1996). With an emphasis on supervision, Pincus’s (1986) research findings indicated that supervisors have an important influence on the job and communication satisfaction of their subordinates.

Communication appears to play a critical role in the superior-subordinate relationship and subordinates’ feeling about and toward their job and the workplace. A form of communication such as that of verbal aggressiveness displayed by supervisors has been found to be negatively related to subordinates’ levels of satisfaction and organizational commitment, and is considered to be mainly destructive (Martin & Anderson, 1996, 1997). Additionally, communication satisfaction is one outcome that has been negatively associated with verbal aggression, with Burgoon and Koper (1984) reporting that less-than-competent communicators often have their
behaviors interpreted as hostile. As a result, the following hypothesis was advanced:

**Hypothesis 1:** There will be a negative relationship between supervisors’ verbal aggression and their subordinates’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction.

Contrary to the negative outcomes associated with verbal aggression, prior research has indicated that mentoring is a concept associated with positive outcomes (Ragins et al., 2000) with prior research indicating positive relationships between mentoring and protégé’s job and career satisfaction (e.g., Scandura & Williams, 2004). As a result of limited research examining informal supervisor to subordinate mentoring, the following hypothesis was advanced.

**Hypothesis 2:** There will be a positive relationship between supervisors’ mentoring and their subordinates’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction.

Communication appears to play a critical role in the superior-subordinate relationship and subordinates’ feeling about and toward their job and the workplace.

Despite the conceptualization of mentoring as enacted through communicative behaviors of coaching, listening, acceptance, confirmation, and friendship (Kram, 1985), limited prior research has examined the association between mentoring and communication satisfaction. Based on the positive communicative behaviors associated with mentoring, it can be extrapolated that communication satisfaction may mediate the relationship between mentoring and organizational commitment and between mentoring and job satisfaction. The lack of previous research examining these constructs together led to the advancement of the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** Will communication satisfaction mediate the relationship between mentoring and subordinates’ job satisfaction?
Research Question 2: Will communication satisfaction mediate the relationship between mentoring and subordinates’ organizational commitment?

One additional area of interest involves the examination of a possible negativity bias that exists within the workplace. The negativity bias contends that the psychological impact of negative events tends to be longer lasting and have a greater influence on individuals’ state of mind than do positive events (Rook, 1984, 1998). Therefore, a supervisor’s verbal aggressiveness directed toward their subordinates may likewise have a greater negative influence on these subordinates than would the positive communication found in mentoring. As a result, the following research question was advanced:

Research Question 3: Which behavior enacted by a supervisor (mentoring or verbal aggression) will serve as the greater predictor of a subordinate’s organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction?

METHOD

Participants

The participants, N = 200 (women, n = 112; men, n = 88), were employees working full-time in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States for a variety of organizations, including education (12.8 %), government (8.4%), services (36.5%), high tech (19.5%), manufacturing (14.4%), civil service (3.7%), and other (4.8%). Employees included those (n = 67) who reported working for a female supervisor and those (n = 133) who reported working for a male supervisor. Employees ranged in tenure from 1 to 47 years (M = 9.1, SD = 8.7), and employees’ average age was 30 years old. Participants reported working for supervisors who were younger than them (n = 84), who were older than them (n = 105), and who were about their same age (n = 11).

Procedures

A network sampling technique was used. Specifically, students enrolled in communication courses at a large Mid-Atlantic university recruited employees. The students were instructed to deliver the questionnaire to full-time working adults. To ensure that the participants were working
adults, the following procedure was followed: The participants (working adults) were given an e-mail address (located in the cover letter) to which they were asked to report the name of their organization in the subject line of the e-mail followed by their name and a telephone number in the body of the e-mail. Participants were asked to return the completed questionnaire in the self-addressed, stamped envelope provided by the researchers, the return address of which was to match the company name they indicated in the subject line of their e-mail. Only envelopes containing a completed questionnaire whose return address matched the company name in the subject line of the e-mails were used in the study. Of the 400 original questionnaires, 246 were returned resulting in a 62% return rate. Of the 246 returned questionnaires, 32 did not have a corresponding e-mail that matched the company name on the envelope and were therefore excluded. Additionally, 14 questionnaires could not be used due to missing data, leaving 200, which were used for this study. The institutional review board granted exempt status because of the limited risk involved with the study and the assurance of confidentiality for the participants, because a self-addressed stamped envelope was provided by the authors as a means for the participants to return the completed questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of several validated instruments assessing employees’ perceptions of their supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggressiveness, as well as subordinates’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction.

Measures

Communication satisfaction was measured with the 19-item Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory (ICSI) developed by Hecht (1978). A 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) was used. A slight modification was made to the original scale with the addition of a lead in sentence (When communicating with my supervisor I feel . . .) preceding each statement. Prior studies reported reliabilities ranging from .72 to .93 and strong validity (Madlock, 2006; Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .81 (M = 62.10, SD = 9.83).

Organizational commitment was measured with the 15-item Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ; Porter et al., 1974). The items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. According to Barge and Schlueter (1988), internal reliability coefficients for the OCQ ranged from .82 to .92. A sample item reads, “I
am proud to tell others that I am part of the organization.” Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .76 ($M = 46.84$, $SD = 7.43$).

Job satisfaction was measured by the eight-item Abridged Job In General Scale (AJIG; Russell et al., 2004). A 5-point Likert-type scale ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}$ to $5 = \text{strongly agree}$) was used instead of the original scale formatting (i.e., using 0 for “no,” 1 for “?,” and 3 for “yes”) to be consistent with other parts of the questionnaire. The scale is comprised of a single word or short statements regarding employees’ overall perception of their job (e.g., Good, and Better than most). The AJIG Scale was found to have strong reliability with a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of .87 (Russell et al., 2004). Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .84 ($M = 23.58$, $SD = 6.37$).

Mentoring was measured by the 15-item Mentoring and Communication Support Scale (Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, & Rouner, 1989). A 5-point Likert-type response format ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}$ to $5 = \text{strongly agree}$) was used. According to Hill et al. (1989), the measure factors into four dimensions, including career mentoring, coaching, collegial social, and collegial task. They reported internal reliability coefficients for the scale that ranged from .75 to .88. Sample items read, “My immediate supervisor shows a parental-like interest in me and my career” and “My immediate supervisor and I are friends as well as superior/subordinate.” Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .89 ($M = 48.27$, $SD = 10.51$).

Verbal aggressiveness was measured by the 20-item Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986). A 5-point Likert-type response format ($1 = \text{never true}$ to $5 = \text{always true}$) was used. According to Johnson, Becker, Wigley, Haigh, and Craig (2007), scale reliability was .84. A lead-in sentences of “While interacting with me or others, my immediate supervisor . . .” was added to the 20 scale items. Sample items read, “uses insults to soften the behaviors of individuals who are very stubborn” and “insults individuals who act in poor taste to shock them into proper behavior.” Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .87 ($M = 58.97$, $SD = 13.02$).

**RESULTS**

Preliminary Analyses

Prior research examining mentoring relationships indicates the presence of a gender affect with respect to mentoring behavior in the workplace with women being perceived as better at psychosocial mentoring than men (see Allen & Eby, 2004). For example, mentors who identify
with and like their protégés are more likely to provide the counseling and personal support functions that comprise psychosocial mentoring. Additionally, prior research suggests that men are much more physically aggressive than women, whereas women are slightly more verbally aggressive than men (Bjorkquist, 1994). Thus, a preliminary analysis was conducted to assess for gender effects in the current study. A series of independent sample *t* tests indicated that no gender effects were indicated with respect to supervisors’ mentoring behaviors, *t*(198) = 0.86, *p* = .39, men (*M* = 47.37, *SD* = 9.69) and women (*M* = 48.72, *SD* = 12.01), or for verbal aggressiveness, *t*(196) = 0.13, *p* = .90, men (*M* = 59.05, *SD* = 12.52) and women (*M* = 59.80, *SD* = 14.07).

**Primary Analyses**

Hypotheses 1 predicted negative relationships between supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness and subordinates’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction. Pearson correlations supported the hypothesis by indicating significant negative relationships between all the variables. Specifically, the findings indicated a moderate negative relationship between supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness and subordinates’ organizational commitment, *r* = −.40, *p* < .001, whereas strong negative relationships were indicated between supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness and subordinates’ job satisfaction, *r* = −.69, *p* < .001, and communication satisfaction, *r* = −.53, *p* < .001 (see Table 1).

Hypothesis 2 predicted positive relationships between supervisors’ perceived mentoring behaviors and subordinates’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction. Pearson correlations partially supported the hypothesis, indicating a strong positive relationships between supervisors’ mentoring behaviors and subordinates’
communication satisfaction, $r = .51$, $p < .001$, and a weak relationship between supervisors’ mentoring behaviors and subordinates’ organizational commitment, $r = .25$, $p < .001$. However, no significant relationship was indicated between supervisors’ mentoring behaviors and subordinates’ job satisfaction. See Table 1 for a full list of the correlations.

Research Question 1 examined whether communication satisfaction would mediate the relationship between supervisor mentoring and subordinate job satisfaction. The mediating paths for job satisfaction were analyzed. Path analysis indicated a direct association between mentoring and communication satisfaction ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$). However, the association between mentoring and job satisfaction was not significant ($\beta = .16$, $p > .05$). When communication satisfaction was included in the model, the association between mentoring and job satisfaction became significant ($\beta = .24$, $p = .001$). Thus, communication satisfaction emerged as a suppressor variable for job satisfaction (see Figure 1). In essence, suppressor variables increase the predictive power of another variable with their inclusion in a regression equation or model (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Research Question 2 examined whether communication satisfaction would mediate the relationship between supervisor mentoring and subordinate organizational commitment. The mediating paths for organizational commitment were analyzed. Path analysis indicated a direct association between mentoring and communication satisfaction ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$). The association between mentoring and organizational commitment was also significant ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$). When communication satisfaction was included in the model, the association between mentoring and organizational commitment became nonsignificant ($\beta = .05$, $p > .05$). The Sobel test revealed significant full mediation ($z = 4.27$, $p < .001$; see Figure 2).

Research Question 3 examined which behavior enacted by a supervisor (mentoring or verbal aggression) would serve as the greater predictor of a subordinate’s organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction. A series of multiple regressions were run beginning with subordinates’ organizational commitment regressed on a linear combination of the two predictor variables. The results of the first regression analysis indicated that a combination of supervisor mentoring and supervisor verbal aggression produced a significant model, $F(2, 195) = 24.74$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .20$, in which supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggressiveness accounted for 20% of the variation in subordinates’ organizational commitment. However, supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness was found to be a greater predictor of subordinates’ organizational commitment, $\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$ than was supervisors’ mentoring, $\beta = .20$, $p < .001$. 
The second multiple regression analysis included subordinates’ job satisfaction being regressed on a linear combination of supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggressiveness. The regression analysis produced a significant model, $F(2, 194) = 21.42, p < .001, R^2 = .48$, in which supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggression accounted for 48% of the variation in subordinates’ job satisfaction. However, supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness was found to be a greater predictor of subordinates’ job satisfaction, $\beta = -.68, p < .001$ than was supervisors’ mentoring, $\beta = .09, p > .05$.

The final multiple regression analysis included subordinates’ communication satisfaction being regressed on a linear combination of supervisors’
mentoring and verbal aggressiveness. The regression analysis produced a significant model, $F(2, 195) = 51.89, p < .001, R^2 = .47$, in which supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggression accounted for 47% of the variation in subordinates’ communication satisfaction. However, supervisors’ verbal aggression was found to be a greater predictor of subordinates’ communication satisfaction, $\beta = -.47, p < .001$ than was supervisors’ mentoring, $\beta = .44, p < .001$.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was threefold. First, the study extended prior mentoring research by examining subordinate communication satisfaction in the supervisor-subordinate mentoring relationship. Second, it extended prior verbal aggression research between supervisors and subordinates by including the influence of mentoring. Third, it examined the existence of a negativity bias within the workplace (Rook, 1984, 1998).

Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that subordinates’ job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and communication satisfaction would be negatively associated with subordinates’ reports of supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness yet positively associated with subordinates’ reports of supervisors’ mentoring. With the exception of a direct association between job satisfaction and mentoring, we found associations that emulated previous research, supporting our hypotheses. However, after deeper exploration of which supervisor behavior (mentoring or verbal aggression) would exert greater predictive power of subordinate outcomes, we discovered Rook’s (1984, 1998) negativity bias to be equally relevant to the supervisor-subordinate relationship. Specifically, the results indicated that negative communicative behavior, such as supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness, had a greater impact on subordinates’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction than did positive communicative behaviors, such as mentoring.

Within the organizational context, subordinates seek affirmation and free expression but such goals are hindered on the introduction of verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Gorden, 1985). While mentoring is one way in which supervisors can obtain these and other related organizational goals (Kram, 1985), supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness pollutes their mentoring efforts. This reflects previous claims of verbal aggression as a destructive form of communication (Infante, 1987). In turn, subordinates who seek the career support and guidance of a mentoring supervisor may be deterred when supervisors are verbally aggressive.
Important for the extension of mentoring research, our findings suggest that the mere act of mentoring is not as vital as is the way supervisors communicatively enact mentoring. Indicative of this claim are findings pertaining to subordinates’ communication satisfaction as a mediating factor. With regard to subordinates’ job satisfaction, mentoring had little influence until communication satisfaction was introduced into the path. Thus, mentors’ ability to stimulate positive relational affect via communication (i.e., communication satisfaction) among their protégés enhances the influence of mentoring on feelings of job satisfaction.

In turn, subordinates who seek the career support and guidance of a mentoring supervisor may be deterred when supervisors are verbally aggressive.

Likewise, communication satisfaction fully mediated the association between mentoring and organizational commitment. That is, when examining the simple correlation between mentoring and organizational commitment, it appears mentoring alone is important for crafting committed employees. However, after including the influence of communication satisfaction into the model, mentoring was no longer directly related to commitment. Therefore, communication satisfaction was found to be a key behavior in mentoring in order to account for subordinates’ organizational commitment. In sum, the act of mentoring without attention to the communication that occurs between a supervisor and subordinate is a futile endeavor.

Although not specifically examined here, previous research has demonstrated how supervisors can communicatively achieve satisfaction. As noted in Clampitt and Downs (1993), differing degrees of satisfaction exist and in supervisory communication, subordinates seek openness, listening and attention, and guidance in solving job-related problems. Wheeless, Wheeless, and Riffle (1989) discovered in the health care context that doctors who engaged in responsive communication styles were found to be significant contributors to nurses’ feelings of communication satisfaction. Overall, communicators who are socially confirming (i.e., empathetic and engage in active listening behaviors), attentive, friendly, and relaxed are perceived
as effective and appropriate (Duran & Zakahi, 1987) and are likely to contribute to satisfactory interactions (Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984). Thus, such communicative behaviors should be encouraged among supervisors for use in their mentoring of subordinates.

In sum, the act of mentoring without attention to the communication that occurs between a supervisor and subordinate is a futile endeavor.

Limitations and Recommendations

When interpreting these results it is important to recognize the limitations of this study. First, it should be noted that we do not intend to suggest or indicate causation. Our exploration of these constructs is relational in nature and is intended to serve as the groundwork for future studies examining causation. Based on our findings, controlled experiments should assess whether causation exists between the variables examined here.

Second, the sample was limited to full-time employees recruited through network sampling techniques. Although our sample was purposefully limited to full-time employees for whom satisfaction and commitment may be more salient (versus just having a job to satisfy monetary needs), our findings should be cautiously extrapolated to part-time employees.

Third, and related to the second, our study was limited to the subordinate perspective. Operating from the standpoint that constructs such as communication satisfaction will be more salient for subordinates than supervisors (Downs, 1992), we again purposefully limited our focus. However, future research would benefit from deeper examination of supervisors’ perspectives pertaining to certain aspects. One such benefit would be to explore if and why supervisors who serve as mentors engage in verbal aggression with their protégés. Verbal aggression research in the interpersonal context has indicated a number of reasons individuals use verbally aggressive messages, such as expressing disdain or anger toward a target (Infante, 1987; Infante & Rancer, 1996). However, it is conceivable that mentoring supervisors may strategically (Heisel, 2000) use verbal aggression for the purpose of achieving constructive outcomes (Infante, 1987). For instance,
mentoring supervisors may engage in verbal aggression with the goal of motivating protégés, not recognizing the damage that may result from this communicative approach.

Altogether, supervisors’ mentoring (i.e., positively) and verbal aggressiveness (i.e., negatively) are competing contingencies in the organizational context. Supervisors should be warned against the use of verbal aggression, which will do more damage than mentoring efforts will do good. Equally important, when embarking on mentoring endeavors, supervisors should be sensitized to the importance of their communication for stimulating subordinates’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

REFERENCES


