Identifying support functions in developmental relationships: A self-determination perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the content of developmental networks from the perspective of self-determination theory. We qualitatively examine 18 protégés' constellations of developmental relationships to identify specific types of developmental support functions. Our study shows that the adoption of self-determination theory leads to a theory-based classification of support functions. The results show the manner in which developmental relationships meet protégés' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Protégés identified the importance of their developer's need-supportive functions to their success, including creating freedom, encouraging self-initiation (autonomy), emulating effective behaviors, confirming and praising (competence), and intimacy and self-disclosure (relatedness). Implications of the findings and suggestions for future research are presented.

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Employees who are ambitious and want to increase their professionalism benefit from the help of others. Therefore, researchers and practitioners have paid much attention to relationships that promote individuals' professional and personal growth, in particular, to mentorships. The prevalence of formal mentoring programs and the flourishing field of mentoring research reflect the importance placed on mentoring relationships at work.

In the last decade, mentoring researchers have broadened their scope to developmental networks (Higgins & Kram, 2001) acknowledging that one specific mentorship may not provide everything a protégé needs. In developmental networks, attention is paid to various developmental relationships, from traditional mentorships to relationships that only provide limited developmental support. This "microsystem perspective" (Chandler, Kram, & Yip, 2011) has proven its usefulness in the mentoring literature, especially by extending our understanding of factors that influence the structure of developmental networks (Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2011). However, insight into the specific content and full range of processes in developmental networks is still limited (Cotton, Shen, & Livne-Tarandach, 2011). In this paper, we contribute to the understanding of how protégés perceive the specific types of support provided by intraorganizational and extraorganizational work developers. By applying self-determination theory (SDT), we present a theory-based framework for identifying these support functions.

This study contributes to mentoring theory in two ways. First, previous qualitative research has shown that the content of exchanges between parties in developmental networks is broader than in traditional mentoring dyads (Cotton et al., 2011; Murphy & Kram, 2010). These studies added new subfunctions to Kram's (1985) original mentoring functions, showing that the generalizability of mentoring support functions to other developmental relationships may be more limited than previously thought. This research line is still in its infancy, and we aim to contribute to a detailed description of the full range of developmental support functions in developmental networks.

Second, we suggest the adoption of SDT as a framework for identifying developmental support functions. This adoption will contribute to a comprehensive view regarding the types of support provided by developers. Central to SDT is the fulfillment of people's

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basic needs, which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The use of SDT in this study is in response to the recent call of relational mentoring researchers (Ragins & Verbos, 2007) to include not only processes and support functions aimed at individual mastery (i.e., autonomy and competence), but also those aimed at interdependence with others (i.e., relatedness). A better understanding of these three needs together, will provide new insights into the types of support provided by developers.

Our research question is the following: How are protégés' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness fulfilled by their developers? To address this question, we conducted a qualitative study among protégés from various organizations. Before we describe the design and results of our study, we will first discuss the theoretical background.

Theoretical background

Developmental support functions

In her seminal work, Kram (1985) identified a set of mentoring functions and classified them into two broad categories: (1) career support, which includes sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments, and (2) psychosocial support, which includes role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. This set of mentoring functions created the foundation for a wide range of mentoring studies. Yet, it is still unknown how these support functions change when a broader range of relationships in addition to the traditional mentorship is included. In developmental network research, all people who are "taking an active interest in and action to advance the protégé's career by providing developmental assistance" are viewed as developers (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 268). Studies that examine the generalizability of traditional mentoring functions show that including such developers adds several subfunctions to Kram's (1985) classic set. For example, Murphy and Kram (2010) examined the support functions of work and non-work developers and added subfunctions, such as encouragement and emotional support, and work–life interface failure. Further, Cotton et al. (2011) showed the importance of freedom and opportunity for skill development, and inspiration and motivation. These studies show the relevance of extending traditional mentoring functions to developmental networks. This study aims to contribute to this line of research by qualitatively examining protégés' developmental networks to identify specific types of developmental support functions. We classify these support functions using SDT, as we believe this will lead to a comprehensive view of developmental support functions.

Self-determination theory

SDT is a theory of human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that suggests that humans have three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to having the experience of acting with a sense of choice, volition, and self-determination. Note that a SDT perspective on autonomy differs from "independence." Acting autonomously does not rule out a sense of relatedness, but means a sense of self-directedness in one's actions (Stone, Deci, & Ryan, 2009). Competence means feeling capable and refers to a felt sense of confidence and effectiveness during actions. Individuals experience competence when they feel that they can influence important outcomes. Relatedness reflects the need to feel connected, as in to love and care, and to be loved and cared for (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals experience relatedness when they have satisfying, supportive social relationships. The central idea of SDT is that opportunities to satisfy these three basic needs facilitate people's self-motivation and effective functioning. SDT conceptualizes motivation as a continuum from non-internalized (controlled) to internalized (autonomous) reasons. When people internalize external requirements into autonomous motivations, they will be more self-determined and motivated. According to SDT, both contextual and intrapersonal factors can facilitate this internalization process. In organizational research, one of the important questions for SDT is how work environments can best support psychological need satisfaction (Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge, 2003). Recently, Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, and Wilbanks (2011) suggested to apply SDT to mentoring research. In this study, we examine how developers can support their protégés' psychological need satisfaction. For example, a mentor who understands the protégé's perspective, provides choice, and encourages self-initiation, is autonomy supportive and could facilitate the protégé's self-motivation and performance. To our knowledge, this paper is the first to empirically evaluate the usefulness of SDT in mentoring research.

The application of SDT could broaden the scope of mentoring research. Traditionally, vocational psychology has conceptualized career development as a process leading to individual mastery, differentiation from others, and vertical progression. In mentoring research, this view has led to a strong focus on support functions that promote competence and independence. However, current discourse about vocational behavior is concerned with relational dimensions, such as human strivings for attachment, connection, affirmation, and support (Blustein, 2011; Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Flum, 2001; Hall, 1996). The call for a relational perspective on mentoring (Ragins & Verbos, 2007) resonates with a basic feature of SDT, i.e. the holistic and theory-based understanding of support functions that define developmental relationships, as it examines the fulfillment of the three basic needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – *together*.

Method

Participants

A total of 18 participants from 17 organizations based in the Netherlands were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). Participants had to meet four selection criteria to be invited. First, we aimed at white-collar employees holding clerical and