Relational Mentoring Episodes as a Catalyst for Empowering Protégés: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

We take empowerment from tasks to relationships by introducing the construct of psychological empowerment in the context of mentoring episodes. We introduce a new perspective for examining psychological empowerment, derived from a protégé's perceptions of relational impact, developmental meaning, interpersonal competence, and relational self-determination arising out of relational mentoring episodes. Empowered protégés are expected to be more proactive in their careers. By applying an empowerment perspective to relational mentoring, we propose a conceptual model to investigate critical interpersonal processes and to discover more about how developmental relationships work. Finally, our aim is also to further our theoretical understanding of relational mentoring episodes. This new direction holds exciting implications for career scholarship, human resource development (HRD) practitioners, and employees.

Keywords

mentoring episodes, empowerment, career development, relational mentoring

Organizational scholars define psychological empowerment as a state of increased intrinsic task motivation that produces generalized beliefs about the extent to which one's task performance has impact, is meaningful, has been accomplished through personal choice, and has been competently performed (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas &

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Velthouse, 1990). Research investigating psychological empowerment has illuminated important insights about structuring task environments and the antecedents and outcomes of these cognitions at the individual, group, and organizational levels of analyses (Maynard, Gilson, & Mathieu, 2012; Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011). Yet, the majority of empowerment literature focuses on improving task-based motivation, while the interpersonal context as a source of empowerment remains underexplored in workplace contexts.

We assert that, separate from task structure, relationships uniquely contribute to the development of psychological empowerment. We focus on what is unique about perceived empowerment that is gained through high-quality mentoring episodes rather than structural components of the task or job. Specifically, if a protégé is engaged in high-quality mentoring episodes, they can still feel empowered, even if their job tasks or structures are not empowering. The feeling of empowerment fostered through relationships can promote the ability of protégés to enter into additional high-quality developmental relationships. One indication there may be other facilitators of empowerment is that interpersonal relationships with leaders and teams have independent, significant effects on job satisfaction and organizational commitment, but which are not mediated by psychological empowerment (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrow, 2000). We also believe that this empowerment is an enabling force for a protégé's career.

Megginson, Clutterbuck, Garvey, Stokes, and Garrett-Harris (2006) called for an understanding of mentoring moments, specifically investigating what leads to "transformation in the mentoring conversation or in the spaces between dialogues" (p. 3). Fletcher and Ragins (2007) stated that studying developmental relationships at the level of one "mutually enhancing growth interaction" (p. 381) has the ability to bring clarity for defining what constitutes mentoring. There has been a great debate and disagreement about what actually constitutes mentoring, coaching, sponsorship, and apprenticeship; however, they all fall under the umbrella of developmental interactions or relationships (D'Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003; Douglas & McCauley, 1999). Mentoring classically involves a one-sided hierarchical relationship with a mentor, an individual with expertise and experience that provides professional development support to contribute to a more novice protégés (Kram, 1985). Kram and Ragins (2007) identified the major paradigm shifts in the area of mentoring. Specifically, mentoring occurs in the context of developmental networks and includes a critical component of reciprocity. Relational mentoring is an "interdependent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning, and development within the career context" (Ragins, 2012, p. 519). Chandler, Kram, and Yip (2011) stated the criticality of clearly stating the definition that guides ones' work. As our article is specifically focused on mentoring episodes, we define "mentors" as those who provide assistance in the form of career/instrumental and psychosocial/emotional support (Higgins & Kram, 2001) and "protégés" as the individuals who are receiving that support, and will use this terminology throughout our article. We propose that relational mentoring episodes are high-quality reciprocal development interactions. Allen and Poteet (2011) applied the within-person performance work of Beal, Weiss, Barros, and McDermid (2005) and proposed that mentoring relationships "are

naturally composed of a series of behavior episodes, each of which can be analyzed to determine relational quality" (p. 127). Thus, the goal of our article is to investigate how high-quality mentoring episodes can foster a sense of psychological empowerment.

We introduce and define a new context for examining psychological empowerment arising out of mentoring relationships. Relationships with mentors actively contribute to the personal and professional growth of protégés by providing assistance in the form of career/instrumental and psychosocial/emotional support (Higgins & Kram, 2001). These types of relationships can be a source of high-quality connections that produce many benefits including positive social capital (Blickle, Witzki, & Schneider, 2009; Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2012; Eby et al., 2013). Another benefit not yet investigated is psychological empowerment, but there is a natural potential for mentors to help protégés navigate the nonlinear career path of today's workplaces.

Individuals increasingly experience boundaryless careers due to uncertainties in job security, greater self-employment, and alternative work arrangements (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). During a time when organizations are doing less to foster talent development, employees need to be proactive in managing their own personal and professional growth (Chiaburu, Baker, & Pitariu, 2006; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). While researchers have focused on ways of improving task structure to increase psychological empowerment (Maynard et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2011), a potentially powerful source of empowerment, arising from relational mentoring episodes, has been largely ignored. We argue that relational mentoring episodes can foster a protégé's psychological empowerment and the confidence to leverage and transform them into high-quality, mutually beneficial relationships. Furthermore, in the current uncertain career environment, it takes more than task performance to remain successful. Mentors can be an instrumental source of the positive social capital (Eby et al., 2013) necessary to navigate boundaryless careers.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the growing conversation on contemporary careers by examining a different type of psychological empowerment, derived from a protégé's perceptions of relational impact, developmental meaning, interpersonal competence, and relational self-determination arising out of developmental relationships. The psychological empowerment literature has largely focused on task structure (Maynard et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2011) without much attention given to interpersonal factors. We draw on theory from the relational mentoring domain to help inform research on developmental relationships. The community psychology literature has investigated community relational empowerment components (e.g., Christens, 2012),[1] and Conger and Kanungo (1988) referred to relational power distribution when defining the concept of empowerment. This integration allows for the development of a conceptual model which incorporates and simultaneously examines many of the interpersonal processes that define healthy developmental relationships. We need to know more about the processes of high-quality mentoring relationships and *why* they work (Bearman, Blake-Beard, Hunt, & Crosby, 2007; Day & Allen, 2004) to better fulfill protégés' needs for development and growth. The motivation behind our conceptual model is to advance our understanding of high-quality mentoring episodes.

Empowerment may be more important in a boundaryless and uncertain career context where protégés must often step outside their comfort zones to advance their development. Eby et al. (2013) also urged researchers to examine high-quality connections and focus on "specific relationship processes" such as empowerment (p. 466). Furthermore, this article answers the call to examine mentoring in the human resource development (HRD) context (Hezlett & Gibson, 2005). We believe that the integration of psychological empowerment and mentoring episodes in the HRD literature is especially critical to foster individual development.

We begin by defining psychological empowerment in the context of mentoring episodes and distinguishing it from the task environment. Next, we apply the relational mentoring literature. Then, we discuss the types of mentoring support that are expected to lead to protégé empowerment in the context of mentoring episodes. Finally, we propose suggestions for career scholarship, HRD practitioners, and protégés.

Psychological Empowerment in the Context of Mentoring Episodes

The present task-based operationalization of psychological empowerment is partially an artifact of the context in which the construct was developed. Yet, early conceptualizations of psychological empowerment discuss how it could be understood as a relational construct. For instance, Conger and Kanungo (1988) discussed how psychological empowerment can be conceptualized as a relational construct albeit through a limited scope focusing on the distribution of formal power. Questions concerning whether sharing power (e.g., authority, resources) was enough to empower an individual were not developed further as the construct evolved to focused specifically on task motivation. For example, when Thomas and Velthouse (1990) introduced their cognitive elements of psychological empowerment, the psychological empowerment was conceptualized purely in regard to task motivation. As such, we introduce psychological empowerment in the context of mentoring episodes.

To distinguish this type of empowerment from the more familiar psychological empowerment associated with tasks, we call it *protégé empowerment*. Much like psychological empowerment, we believe that protégé empowerment is a multifaceted construct. Drawing on the cognitive components (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), we posit that facets of protégé empowerment are perceptions of developmental meaning, relational impact, interpersonal competence, and relational self-determination. Thus, there are four dimensions to protégé empowerment, two inward dimensions focused on the mentoring relationship itself (relational impact and developmental meaning) and two outward dimensions that propel a protégé toward new relationships (interpersonal competence and relational self-determination).

Indeed, protégé empowerment and psychological empowerment hold many similarities. They both concern the internal state of an individual, lead to motivation, and are multifaceted. Yet, as will be explained in the following section, the two types of empowerment are not one in the same. Specifically, the two empowerment conceptualizations have decidedly different referents. Each of the four cognitive facets described by Thomas

and Velthouse (1990) are specifically in reference to an individual's work or task, whereas protégé empowerment's facets are purely regarding one's relationship with a mentor. Thus, we argue that the two different types of empowerment are mutually exclusive. That is, we believe that one can feel relatively empowered regarding their work tasks and simultaneously feel helpless in relation to their mentor. To help contrast the different types of empowerment, we contrast their facets below. Furthermore, to explain why empowerment is salient to our understanding of the role of mentoring relationships in a contemporary career context, we next define each facet of empowerment.

Developmental Meaning

Traditionally, the concept of *meaning* concerns the degree to which an individual finds their work tasks or projects in line with their intrinsic values or standards (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The basic premise behind this facet is that the more an individual cares about their job, task, or project, the more likely they are going to exert effort, stay committed, and remain involved on the job. As such, measures of meaning have been relatively generic, consisting of items such as "The work I am doing is important" and "What I am trying to accomplish is meaningful to me" (Tymon, 1988). Consequently, this conceptualization is only concerned with the meaning of the job, task, or project as a whole. Thus, we translate this idea into the context of mentoring episodes.

Developmental meaning refers to the importance that a protégé places on mentoring episodes and the extent to which the protégé cares about the mentor's support. It is an inward facet that focuses on the characteristics of the specific mentoring relationship. People have a fundamental need to maintain interpersonal connections with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) as this is essential to human thriving (Ryff & Singer, 2000), personal well-being (Ryff, 1989), and physiological health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). We propose that the developmental meaning facet of protégé empowerment reflects a protégé's perceived fit between developmental needs and the support received from mentors. This is important as the degree to which expectations are met can influence the quality of developmental relationships, trust (Young & Perrewe, 2000), perceptions of support received (Fullick, Smith-Jentsch, & Kendall, 2013), and relationship satisfaction (Ortiz-Walters, Eddleston, & Simione, 2010).

Relational Impact

In context of task motivation, *impact* concerns an individual's belief that their actions will lead to their intended outcomes (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). The facet of impact is outside the consideration of whether an individual has the ability to effectively engage in certain behaviors. Rather, impact is solely concerned with the degree of influence those actions will have. This is reflected in measurements of impact with items generally assessing the degree to which an individual will influence or has control in their work environment (Spreitzer, 1995). This conceptualization of impact is unidirectional in nature (one's impact on or influence over others), whereas our conceptualization of impact is bidirectional.

Relational impact is the extent to which a protégé believes he or she has gained interpersonal influence with a mentor. In the relationship, a mentor already has a degree of influence or impact on a protégé. When a protégé gains the feeling of having impact on a mentor, then the relationship becomes mutually influential. The following quote from a qualitative study of mentoring relationships conducted by Kram and Isabella (1985) illustrates this dimension of protégé empowerment: "I don't consider him like a boss. It's more like a peer relationship. I don't feel equal in responsibility, but I feel equal in ability to influence his thought" (p. 126). In this sense, the facet of relational impact is inward focused as it concerns a change within a mentoring relationship.

Relational impact reflects a protégé's "person power" (cf. Porter, Angle, & Allen, 2003, p. 118). Their role as a protégé is seen as making a difference to the mentor. For example, mentors seek information from protégés if they perceive the protégé as competent (Mullen & Noe, 1999). Relational impact is a signal that a protégé is empowered and believes the developmental relationship is mutually beneficial. This mutual influence enables positive connections in work relationships (Roberts, 2007) and close mentoring bonds (Ragins & Verbos, 2007).

Interpersonal Competence

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) described *competence* as "the degree to which a person can perform task activities skillfully when he or she tries" (p. 672). Unlike impact, competence concerns an individual's belief in their actual ability to accomplish an intended work task. Like impact, however, this facet is purely concerned with efficacy in relation to work tasks. The degree to which an individual feels competent is sourced from and in reference to regular work tasks. However, our extension of this psychological empowerment facet differs in the source and referent of the feelings of efficacy.

Interpersonal competence is the extent to which a protégé's belief in his or her ability to network with others is enhanced by high-quality mentoring episodes. Protégés who are high in interpersonal competence are likely to continue effective mentoring relationships and initiate new developmental relationships they view as potentially beneficial. As such, interpersonal competence is an outwardly focused facet of protégé empowerment. Furthermore, interpersonal competence focuses on the effects of interpersonal interactions with mentors, and on how these shape a protégé's expertise and confidence in relating to others. Thus, they may satisfy a protégé's need for competence and empower the protégé. This is consistent with Conger and Kanungo (1988), who placed importance on efficacy feelings in the motivational process. Conger and Kanungo talked about building self-efficacy for tasks through these verbal supports. However, we believe there is a specific type of this in mentoring relationships that will lead to a protégé's self-efficacy about relationships rather than tasks.

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory holds that efficacy beliefs are dynamic, malleable, and subject to change relative to specific domains. In our model, the domain is interpersonal, and the associated empowerment is produced from feelings of interpersonal

comfort that result through positive interactions with mentors (Ortiz-Walters et al., 2010). We argue that interpersonal competence, as part of empowerment, relates to a protégé's sense of interpersonal self-efficacy. Competency in expressing emotions in social settings should further enhance the strength of the relationship between protégé and mentor (Higgins & Kram, 2001) and can lead to greater job learning, receipt of support from mentors (Chun, Litzky, Sosik, Bechtold, & Godshalk, 2010; Liu, Xu, & Weitz, 2011) that may result in a protégé's empowerment, and positive job attitudes (Sy, Tram, & O'Hara, 2006).

Relational Self-Determination

Self-determination or choice is typically defined as an individual's belief that they have a choice or control in their actions (Spreitzer, 1995). Although context-free in the definition, the items used to measure self-determination often reference an individual's work or job characteristics (e.g., "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job"; "I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work"). Self-determination often concerns how much control an individual feels that he or she has over what, when, and how work is done (Spector, 1986). Rather than focusing on the job characteristics or work autonomy, our focus is specifically on a mentoring relationship.

Relational self-determination is perceived choice or a sense of control in managing mentoring episodes. This includes a protégé's belief that he or she can initiate or even end relationships as needs arise or change. In other words, it is outwardly focused because it provides a protégé with a sense of control in continuing or beginning mentoring relationships. We propose that empowered protégés feel more confident engaging in developmental initiation, defined by Higgins, Chandler, and Kram (2007) as the "set of development-seeking behaviors undertaken by a focal individual that are intended to enhance his or her skills, knowledge, task performance, and/or personal learning" (p. 349). Protégés with relational self-determination are interactive and engaged rather than passive recipients in mentoring episodes and feel empowered to make developmental decisions of their own accord.

A central tenet of self-determination theory is that the individual believes he or she is self-directed rather than believing that external forces are controlling behavior (Gagne & Deci, 2005), and so there is a belief that the self is responsible for initiating and regulating one's actions and behavioral patterns (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Thus, empowered protégés have influence in mentoring episodes with others rather than being controlled and manipulated by a mentor. Following the logic of Relational Cultural Theory, protégés who are empowered would "have the skills, desire, and ability to move from and through episodes of disconnection back to connection" (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007, p. 382).

Now that we have defined psychological empowerment in the context of mentoring episodes and explained how this type of protégé empowerment extends beyond the traditional view of psychological empowerment, we will discuss how high-quality mentoring episodes can facilitate this empowerment for protégés.

Relational Mentoring Episodes as Sources of Psychological Empowerment

In the past, employees' career development occurred by way of support received from a mentor who was usually an older, more experienced, and higher ranking member of the same organization (Kram, 1985). Now that the career environment has become so unpredictable (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Kram & Hall, 1989), the recommendation is to supplement the traditional mentoring model of professional development (de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004; Higgins & Kram, 2001) with multiple mentors. We propose that the best way to do this is to strategically cultivate mentoring episodes with the aim of producing high-quality reciprocal development interactions. We assert that the mentoring episode quality is what is truly important to give rise to protégé empowerment. The mentoring literature outlines different types of supports received from mentors that help build and sustain progression in protégés' professional and personal lives.

Types of Mentoring Supports

Mentors teach, guide, and advise their protégés in managing their professional lives (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Prior research establishes that mentoring is a multifaceted construct consisting of two main types of support: career support and psychosocial support (Allen & Finkelstein, 2003; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990).

Career support helps protégés with task, work, and other vocationally related issues (Kram, 1985; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). Mentoring episodes that provide career support may suggest strategies for handling multiple projects, help protégés obtain challenging assignments that increase their skills, and provide work-related resources such as advice, feedback, and information.

Psychosocial support, alternatively, promotes confidence and identification of a professional self (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000; Kram, 1985). Mentoring episodes may include psychosocial support when a mentor confirms a protégé's intelligence, exploring personal and professional concerns, or acts as a reliable friend, which can lead to emotional benefits such as greater work satisfaction (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). As with career support, psychosocial support is multidimensional consisting of friendship, confirmation, and acceptance of professional competence, counseling on personal and work issues, and role modeling (Noe, 1988; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). The literature on help-seeking and organizational careers establish that individuals seek psychosocial help for personal and career problems from mentors in academic settings (Fullick et al., 2013; Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005) and work settings (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). Relational mentoring, which takes these types of support to a new level, will be discussed next.

Relational Mentoring

Traditional mentoring typically involves a hierarchical, unidirectional relationship with a mentor, an individual with expertise and experience that provide support to

contribute to the professional development of more novice protégés (Kram, 1985). Relational mentoring is an "interdependent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning, and development within the career context" (Ragins, 2012, p. 519). The following principles distinguish relational mentoring from traditional mentoring (Ragins, 2012). First, relational mentoring relies on communal norms, where mentors and protégés provide support to one another based on need instead of traditional social exchange frameworks where there is an expected return on that investment. Relational mentoring recognizes that not all high-quality relationships lead to a change in objective outcomes like promotion or pay. Instead, it expands the range of possible outcomes to include relationship effectiveness, professional identity, resilience, and personal development.

Relational mentoring also contests the assumptions of traditional mentoring that describe protégés as successful when they become independent and autonomous. Instead, success should involve a protégé's ability to thrive in *interdependent* collective interactions and relationships (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). Following the relational perspective (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ragins, 2012; Ragins & Verbos, 2007), the focus shifts to include a reciprocal component that can amass benefits for not just protégés but for mentors as well. This reciprocal perspective challenges traditional mentorship power dynamics and argues that traditional mentoring definitions undermine a protégé's potential to have mutual influence in the relationship (Ragins, 2012). This type of mutual influence has also been found in practice and may even inspire employees to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors in support of their coworkers (Ghosh, Reio, & Haynes, 2012). In relational mentorships, both protégés and mentors learn from each other. This idea aligns with our conceptual model of protégé psychological empowerment, which will be discussed below, where a protégé is also responsible for taking an active responsibility in cultivating positive outcomes. Examples of protégé responsibilities are to clearly communicate challenges and opportunities they are facing. Some of the others are mutual respect, trust, and commitment. They also need to listen actively to their mentors while practicing critical inquiry with honesty and empathy to harness the benefits of these developmental relationships.

While we acknowledge that some mentoring relationships can be dysfunctional in nature (e.g., Eby & McManus, 2004; Kumar & Blake-Beard, 2012), our approach is aligned with a positive organizational scholarship (POS) perspective (Dutton & Ragins, 2007). By focusing on high-quality mentoring relationships, we identify the enabling conditions which give rise to protégé empowerment leading to professional and self-growth.

Different types of supports are also now being more fully recognized as important in helping individuals cope with a variety of issues such as family-to-work conflict (van Daalen, Willemsen, & Sanders, 2006), decisions to change careers (Higgins, 2001), and job satisfaction (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Thus, we next show how these mentoring episodes can be fruitful for enhancing a protégé's sense of empowerment and provide specific propositions for future research, as also presented in Figure 1.
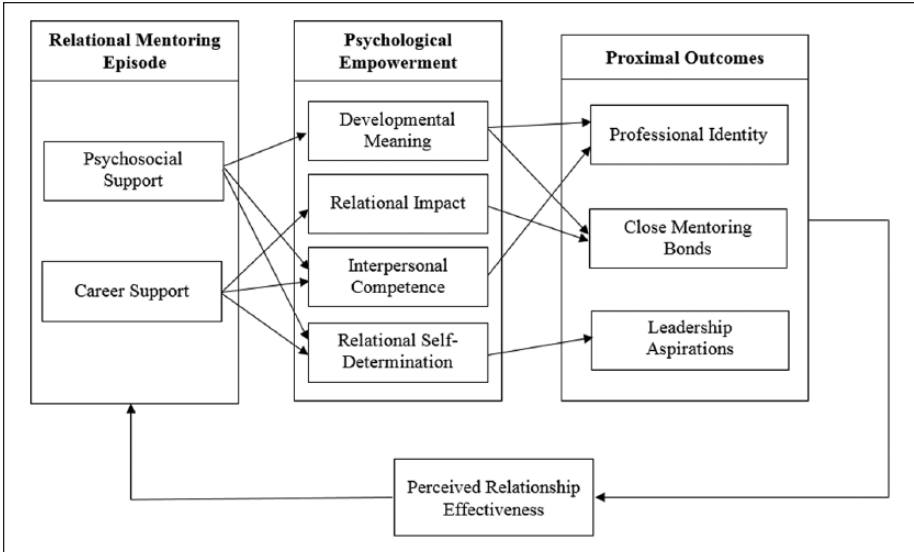
Figure 1. Proposed model of developmental outcomes of protégé empowerment arising from mentoring episodes.

Types of Relational Mentoring Episodes

As careers become more boundaryless, the means to success are less well defined with little existence of standard career paths. Mentoring episodes can be used to facilitate introductions to high-profile individuals inside the organization or those of influence in other external settings (e.g., nonprofit boards). The more visibility and exposure that is provided, the more a protégé will feel integrated into the mentor's network. In doing so, the more meaning and value this relationship will likely have to a protégé. Likewise, when a mentor protects a protégé from damaging situations or harmful interactions, the more the protégé will care about the mentor because of the interpersonal investments made. This level of investment and degree of mentor proactivity has been cited as a sign of strong-tie relationships (Gibson, 2005).

Protégés see themselves as having more organizational policy influence, resource power, and access to important people than nonprotégés (Fagenson, 1988). It is conceivable, based on this power perspective, that high-quality mentoring episodes can generate a sense of relational impact in that protégés believe they have interpersonal influence on mentors. Mentors' information seeking is significantly associated with the extent to which a mentor is influenced by a protégé and how competently the mentor perceives the protégé (Mullen & Noe, 1999). For example, one of the authors (an assistant professor) had a mentor (a full professor) who invited her to participate in a brainstorming meeting about curriculum changes at their university. She was one of only two untenured professors at the meeting. This opportunity illustrated that the mentor valued her input and saw her as competent; this increased her sense of relational impact.

Proposition 1: Protégés who have experienced career support in relational mentoring episodes will have higher levels of relational impact.

Being assigned or sponsored to work on projects provides a protégé with developmental opportunities to enhance interpersonal competence as a protégé is likely to encounter people from different backgrounds or with differing working styles. As well, mentors can provide informational resources such as direct advice and feedback about how well a protégé interacts with others and what needs to be tweaked in networking situations. In this coaching capacity, mentors create the supportive conditions that enhance feelings of interpersonal competence.

Proposition 2: Protégés who have experienced career support in relational mentoring episodes will have higher levels of interpersonal competence.

Career support, in the form of coaching, can also provide a context within which mentors allow a protégé to exercise relational self-determination. When coaching, a mentor may engage in ongoing discussions with his or her protégé that include conversations about career self-management strategies. Such autonomous, help-seeking behaviors (Chiaburu et al., 2006) can include asking for feedback, being proactive about growth including initiating other developmental relationships as needed, and setting and pursuing one's own goals. When a protégé believes that he or she has control in making and regulating self-reliant choices and decisions, we argue that the protégé should feel an enhanced sense of empowerment.

Proposition 3: Protégés who have experienced career support in relational mentoring episodes will have higher levels of relational self-determination.

We propose that the very nature of what encompasses psychosocial support should enhance a protégé's sense of empowerment gained from mentoring episodes. To begin with, an example of high-quality mentoring episodes related to psychosocial support would be where mentors suggest and model different or alternative relational strategies (e.g., ways to handle and deal with a difficult colleague) that enhance a protégé's interpersonal competence or expertise and confidence in the ability to work with and relate to others. For example, a mentor brought one of our authors with her to attend an invitation-only conference where she would be exposed not only to thought leaders in her field but also to other protégés who were at her level. The mentor expressed her pride in the protégé's accomplishments when introducing her to others. The mentor's confidence in her helped her to feel interpersonal confidence as she encountered others at the conference. As a result, she was able to gain interpersonal experiences with both senior leaders and up-and-coming individuals in her field.

Proposition 4: Protégés who have experienced psychosocial support in relational mentoring episodes will have higher levels of interpersonal competence.

Another example involves a protégé receiving confirmation and acceptance from the mentor (Kram, 1985). Within this capacity, if a mentor sincerely accepts a protégé and both privately and publicly praises him or her, the protégé's feeling of influence in the developmental relationship is likely to be enhanced. Being valued and validated through mentoring episodes such as this should promote empowerment. Mentoring episodes in which a mentor invests time to counsel on personal or professional matters should confirm developmental meaning.

> **Proposition 5:** Protégés who have experienced psychosocial support in relational mentoring episodes will have higher levels of developmental meaning.

For example, a mentor provided one of our authors with psychosocial support through a difficult transition in her career when an important mentoring and supervisory relationship had become severely dysfunctional. The mentor listened, affirmed confidence in her abilities, and expressed a willingness to support her development. This gave her the developmental meaning and relational self-determination to end the dysfunctional relationship and begin to build new developmental relationships. It also drew them closer together. The mentor made her believe that her success was important to her and that together they could save her career.

Mentor behaviors that are consistent with or exceed what is expected may encourage a protégé to engage more fully in the relationship with the mentor. A trusting, open friendship should support a protégé's ability to choose behaviors when interacting with a mentor because she believes she is accepted and respected by the mentor. These conditions lead to an increase in the protégé's sense of relational self-determination (Deci et al., 1989). We propose that these mentoring episodes can foster protégé psychological empowerment and provide a protégé with the confidence to leverage and transform these episodes into high-quality, mutually beneficial relationships, also known as relational mentoring.

> **Proposition 6:** Protégés who have experience psychosocial support in relational mentoring episodes will have higher levels of relational self-determination.

Proximal Developmental Outcomes of Protégé Empowerment

For consequences of protégé empowerment arising from relational mentoring episodes, we examine proximal, shorter term outcomes as shown in Figure 1, which are theoretically consistent with an empowerment perspective and are relevant skills needed for today's careers. These outcomes include the development of a professional identity, leadership aspirations, and close mentoring bonds.

Professional Identity and Leadership Aspirations

Professional identity includes the values, motives, and practices used to shape "the perception of oneself as a professional and as a particular type of professional" (Bucher

& Stelling, 1977, p. 213). Moreover, professional or career identity encompasses managerial striving, setting career goals aimed at managerial positions, and trying to lead or requesting and assuming leadership roles (London, 1983). Kram's (1985) seminal qualitative study, along with more recent quantitative work (e.g., Dobrow & Higgins, 2005), provides initial evidence that mentoring relationships can have an influence on a protégé's professional identity. The extent to which mentoring relationships contribute to a protégé's sense of professional identity has not been examined thoroughly (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005), nor has empowerment derived from mentoring relationships and the link to leadership aspirations. We are specifically interested in understanding how relational mentoring episodes can facilitate protégé empowerment and contribute to the professional identity and leadership aspirations of protégés. For example, one author had a mentor who was actively involved in their professional organization and frequently modeled behaviors in support of their profession. The mentor was given the opportunity to lead a program for new conference attendees, which paired them with seasoned conference goers. The mentor trusted the protégé to run the program, empowering her as a leader. This series of mentoring episodes empowered the protégé, giving her the confidence to be successful, and solidified her identification with the profession.

Relationships with mentors can be instrumental in (a) the development of a protégé's professional identity and (b) aspirations to assume leadership roles. A protégé should view her professional identity as dynamic rather than only narrowly tied to specific tasks or jobs. This type of dynamic identity allows a protégé to continuously adapt to interpersonal situations and work relationships. An empowered protégé will have a stronger sense of professional identity as a direct result of meaningful interactions with mentors that help the protégé become aware of developmental needs, strengths, and weaknesses (Kram, 1996).

> **Proposition 7:** Career support provided in relational mentoring episodes will predict professional identity, and this relationship will be partially mediated by developmental meaning and interpersonal competence.

Beyond professional identity development, empowerment may just be the encouragement protégés need to seek out challenging roles such as becoming a leader. An important component of leading is about influence and the appropriate use of power (Bass, 1990). Through interpersonal influence on mentors, the confidence and motivation necessary to want to aspire to become a leader can be nurtured in a protégé. Moreover, perceptions of influence on a variety of mentors should enhance a protégé's self-efficacious feelings that the protégé can lead individuals with differing working styles or backgrounds. Feeling able to autonomously manage interactions with mentors should further enhance a protégé's identity especially with respect to aspiring and envisioning the self as a leader, as authentic behavior promotes a sense of self-integration and greater role satisfaction (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). Relational self-determination creates an increased sense of control about the self in relation to others, and may shift how protégés view their role in their own career development. Protégés may take more initiative as they perceive greater ownership of their

careers. Moreover, those who feel empowered are more proactive and less resistant to change (Spreitzer, 2006). As such, empowerment may be associated with feeling comfortable with uncertainty and thriving under pressure and can provide the momentum a protégé needs to pursue leadership positions. For example, those individuals who are involved in developmental relationships exhibit greater career motivation than those who do not interact with mentors (Day & Allen, 2004).

> **Proposition 8:** Career support provided in relational mentoring episodes will predict leadership aspirations, and this relationship will be mediated by relational self-determination.

In summary, positive connections to others enrich positive identities, and provide a context for self-discovery and increased self-efficacy (Roberts, 2007) and build social resources (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010) indispensable for the development of a protégé's professional identity and aspirations to assume leadership roles.

Close Mentoring Bonds

This outcome recognizes that a mentoring relationship can be the source of positive emotion. In social exchange, researchers have developed a theory of relational cohesion and found that social exchange relationships can produce positive affect (Lawler & Yoon, 1996, 1998). Similarly, when relational mentoring episodes lead to empowerment, this heightened sense of self is expected to produce a strong dyadic and affective bond between mentor and protégé. Ragins and Verbos (2007) first proposed that relational mentoring could lead to close mentoring bonds. We propose that this happens through the mechanism of a protégé's psychological empowerment. A close mentoring bond is defined as a high-quality connection (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) that is dyadic and affective, and is characterized by high levels of commitment to the mentoring relationship (Ragins & Verbos, 2007).

A close mentoring bond is a response to a fundamental human need for belonging or relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Den Hartog, De Hoogh, & Keegan, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). High-quality connections involve a heightened sense of emotional involvement, tensility (or strength that bends but does not break under strain), and a generative expansion of capabilities of both participants (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Subjectively, a high-quality connection exposes the parties to mutuality, positive energy, and positive regard (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). As a protégé's relational self-determination increases, so too should the close mentoring bond.

> **Proposition 9:** Psychosocial support relational mentoring episodes will predict close mentoring bonds, and this relationship will be mediated by relational self-determination.

Finally, if a protégé possess a strong professional identity, leadership aspirations, and close mentoring bonds, he or she is expected to positively evaluate the effectiveness of the

mentoring relationship. In turn, we propose that a protégé will seek out additional mentoring episodes, whether it be in the current mentoring relationship or initiating new mentoring relationships, when a protégé attains desired psychological outcomes. In their meta-analysis, Eby et al. (2013) found support for a positive relationship between mentoring support and interaction frequency. This premise also parallels research conducted in the feedback seeking literature. Specifically, the most important determinant whether an individual will seek feedback is their perception of how valuable that feedback will be (Ashford, 1986; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). Another parallel exists in the social capital literature, where protégés will evaluate the opportunity costs associated with the current mentoring relationship and may decide that those resources are better used elsewhere (Hezlett & Gibson, 2007). We extend this idea to the context of mentoring by supposing that if a mentoring relationship is perceived as a valuable to a protégé, they will, in turn, seek out more mentoring episodes, consistent with positive reinforcement principles.

> **Proposition 10:** Perceived relationship effectiveness will lead to more mentoring episodes.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

HRD emphasizes empowering people by nurturing the contributions that they can bring to improve effectiveness for themselves, organizations, and societies (United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, 2015). Our article centers on what is distinctive about the perceived protégé empowerment gained through mentoring episodes, rather than structural components of the task or job, which has been the primary focus of the psychological empowerment literature (Maynard et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2011). We add to the emerging contemporary mentoring dialogue by examining a different type of psychological empowerment, derived from a protégé's perceptions of relational impact, developmental meaning, interpersonal competence, and relational self-determination arising out of developmental relationships. We integrated theory from the relational mentoring domain to inform research on developmental relationships, a potentially powerful source of empowerment that has been largely ignored. Relational mentoring episodes can promote a protégé's psychological empowerment and the confidence to transform them into high-quality, mutually beneficial relationships. In addition, mentors can be an instrumental source of the positive social capital (Eby et al., 2013) necessary to navigate boundaryless careers. We posit that if a protégé is engaged in high-quality mentoring episodes, he or she can still feel empowered, even if job tasks or structures are not empowering. We also believe that this empowerment is an enabling force for a protégé's career, and something that should be fostered by HRD initiatives. Psychological empowerment may be more important in a boundaryless career context where protégés must go outside their comfort zones to develop. We follow recommendations from Eby et al. (2013) to investigate high-quality connections and focus on "specific relationship processes" such as empowerment (p. 466).

We advance a conceptual model in which mentoring episodes empower protégés to be more proactive in their careers. In a recent meta-analysis, Ghosh (2014) found that protégés were more likely to receive both career and psychosocial support when they were proactive. Our model informs the maturing discussion on contemporary career development theory by conceptualizing psychological empowerment as a product of relational mentoring episodes. By using an empowerment perspective to view mentoring relationships, we develop a conceptual model that investigates critical interpersonal processes and therefore answer the call by researchers to discover more about *why* mentoring relationships work (Bearman et al., 2007; Day & Allen, 2004). We propose that these high-quality mentoring episodes cultivate increased protégé empowerment, which can also lead protégés to be more proactive and effective in their careers. Finally, our aim is also to further our theoretical understanding of mentoring episodes and, as such, we expand the nomological network of developmental relationships.

Recommendations for Future HRD Research

There are many avenues to explore for the future, one of which is to empirically examine our conceptual model. Our model also provides the foundation to examine additional predictors of protégé empowerment such as individual characteristics and situational factors. Specifically, researchers should investigate protégé empowerment in diversified developmental relationships to determine whether this may benefit women and minorities differently than male and nonminority protégé. Young, Cady, and Foxon (2006) emphasized the importance of considering gender composition, which could possibly be influential to mentoring episode quality. Likewise, it makes sense to assess mentors' perceptions of how empowered they think a protégé to be as this may have implications regarding the amount of developmental assistance provided. Prior research supports the notion that protégés and mentors have different reports of and reactions to the same relationship (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2008; Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006). There are also potential distal, longer term outcomes that could be explored as they may relate to empowerment, such as income and promotions, career mobility, organizational commitment, and the consideration of nonwork-based outcomes such as life satisfaction.

Another potential area of exploration involves the use of alternative sources of support for personal and professional development. In one study, most participants (75%) report having developmental relationships with a wide range of persons—known as developers—who help to advance the individual's career, competence, and occupational identity by providing work and personal assistance (Allen & Finkelstein, 2003). Developers can include work-related (Kram & Isabella, 1985) sources such as supervisors, coworkers/peers, colleagues from professional associations, and informal and formal mentors as well as nonwork sources (Murphy & Kram, 2010), including family members, friends, and community members. Ragins (2012) also emphasized a holistic approach that includes the realms of both work and nonwork, which can both be impacted by high-quality mentoring episodes. It would be interesting to determine whether relational mentoring episodes with nonwork developers can also foster protégé empowerment.

As our focus is aligned with a POS perspective, it would be instrumental for future research to examine how and under what conditions negative mentoring episodes impact protégé empowerment. As relational mentoring is reciprocal, the outcomes of protégé empowerment for a mentor would be another avenue for future research. Finally, research into HRD interventions aimed at fostering protégé empowerment could lead to best practices that could be disseminated.

Propositions for HRD Practice

There are several proposed practical implications and applications of this conceptual model for human resource developers, mentors, and protégés. First, HRD practitioners might design interventions in mentor and protégé training to emphasize the benefits of relational mentoring and encourage attention to the potential for high-quality relationships. Second, we propose that human resource developers should encourage the intentional use of various developmental sources because protégés who feel empowered due to mentoring relationships may be more proactive in their personal and professional development. Psychological empowerment also has proposed implications for close mentoring bonds. If psychologically safe mentoring episodes are cultivated with mentors, HRD practitioners might encourage protégés to try different relational strategies like active listening, conflict management, and communication methods that can lead to close mentoring bonds. Furthermore, protégé empowerment may be crucially important for those in creative roles. Experiential development and mentoring are argued to be essential aspects of engendering creativity (Ligon, Wallace, & Osburn, 2011). Through protégé empowerment, these individuals may take some more calculated risks needed to produce creative outcomes.

It is also important for protégés themselves to recognize that they must take personal responsibility, be proactive (Fugate et al., 2004), and take initiative (Chiaburu et al., 2006) to manage their development, which is much easier to achieve if they feel empowered. We propose that empowerment will allow them to effectively navigate boundaryless careers and strategically utilize multiple mentoring episodes for career advancement. Rock and Garavan (2006) stressed that "individuals should seek to participate in multiple developmental relationships, with different types of networks and different developmental outcomes" (p. 349). For example, high-quality connections to others enrich professional identities, provide a context for self-discovery and increased self-efficacy (Roberts, 2007), and build the social resources (Dutton et al., 2010) necessary to assume leadership roles. Meaningful connections also enhance task accomplishment; offer career development; cultivate sensemaking of events, experiences, and change; reinforce a feeling of value and being valued; provide the personal support to reduce work stress and anxiety (Kahn, 2007); and increase resilience (Stephens, Heaphy, Carmeli, Spreitzer, & Dutton, 2013).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have applied the concept of psychological empowerment in the context of developmental relationships. Our goal is to extend psychological empowerment from a focus on tasks to relationships. Our conceptual model is also motivated

by the desire to increase our understanding of high-quality relational mentoring episodes. We suggested that facilitating conditions of mentoring episodes can empower protégés to be more proactive in their careers. More specifically, we propose that mentoring episodes should produce an enhanced state of relational impact, interpersonal competence, developmental meaning, and relational self-determination that has beneficial, immediate implications for protégés' careers.

Note

1.   Thank you to a reviewer for informing us about this reference.

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