Coworkers' Perspectives on Mentoring Relationships

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Abstract

Research into workplace mentoring is primarily focused on the experiences and perceptions of individuals involved in the relationship, while there is scarcely any research focusing on the impact of mentoring relationships on their social environment. This exploratory research aims to give insight into how coworkers' perceptions and experiences of informal mentoring relationships in their workgroup are related to their perceptions of workgroup functioning. The results of 21 semistructured interviews show that coworkers believe that mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's functioning by influencing both their workgroup's *performance* and *climate*. Coworkers applied an instrumental perspective and described how they think that mentoring relationships both improve and hinder their workgroup's performance as they influence the individual functioning of mentor and protégé, the workgroup's efficiency, and organizational outcomes. Furthermore, coworkers applied a relational perspective and described how mentoring relationships may influence their workgroup's climate in primarily negative ways as they may be perceived as a subgroup, cause feelings of distrust and envy, and are associated with power issues. The results of this study emphasize the importance of studying mentoring relationships in their broader organizational context and set the groundwork for future research on mentoring relationships in workgroups.

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Keywords

mentoring, informal relationships, group or team effectiveness or performance, group or team dynamics/processes

Organizational citizenship behaviors such as intergroup helping behaviors are essential for team effectiveness (Ng & Van Dyne, 2005; Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997). A specific way in which group members can help each other is by establishing mentoring relationships, "whereby advice, counseling, and developmental opportunities are provided to a protégé by a mentor" (Eby, 1997, p. 126). The essence of a mentoring relationship is that the mentor is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, and/or experience (Bozeman & Feeney, 2008) and is willing to share these to positively influence the protégé's career experiences. Although mentoring relationships are typically formed between organizational members of unequal status, peer mentoring between members of equal status can also occur (Bozionelos, 2004). A considerable amount of research has been devoted to how individuals engaged in mentoring relationships perceive and experience these relationships. For example, scholars have investigated which functions are provided by mentors and how these support functions are perceived by protégés (e.g., Fowler & O'Gorman, 2005; Janssen, van Vuuren, & de Jong, 2013; Levesque, O'Neill, Nelson, & Dumas, 2005), and which positive and negative experiences are experienced within such relationships (e.g., Eby, Butts, Durley, & Ragins, 2010; Eby & Lockwood, 2005).

Although experiences and perceptions of those involved in mentoring relationships are examined extensively, the way in which mentoring relationships affect their surrounding social context within workgroups is an under-researched area. Most mentoring practices are—to some extent—visible to coworkers (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), so mentoring relationships arguably tend to influence their workgroup. However, most studies tend to examine mentoring relationships as if they "exist in a vacuum" (Allen, 2007, p. 141). Emerging theoretical perspectives challenge this isolated approach and suggest that mentoring dyads should be studied in their wider organizational context (Chandler, Kram, & Yip, 2011; Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2011; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Janssen, van Vuuren, & de Jong, 2016). Although previous studies have examined differences between groups of protégés and nonprotégés (Fagenson, 1988, 1992; Scandura, 1997), they did not examine how coworkers' perspectives on a mentoring relationship in their work team (as coworkers being outsiders of the relationship) influence their perceptions of workgroup functioning. The current study provides more insight in this by addressing the following research question:

> **Research Question 1:** What are coworkers' perceptions and experiences of informal mentoring relationships in their workgroup, and in what ways are their experiences related to perceptions of workgroup functioning?

This study has two objectives, which contribute to both theory and practice. First, our qualitative approach allows a detailed look at how mentoring dimensions influence their workgroup, dynamics that are much more difficult to capture in quantitative work. As the quality of relationships between individuals and their team members influences team effectiveness (Tse & Dasborough, 2008) and there is a growing interest in implementing formal mentoring programs by organizations, understanding individual team members' perceptions and experiences of mentoring relationships within their workgroup is important. Our study is a first starting point in this new research field. In that way, we directly answer the call for more research that addresses how mentoring dyads are situated in their organizational context. Second, we bridge the literature on workgroups and mentoring dyads, by providing insights into how mentoring relationships may affect important workgroup outcomes (such as workgroup performance) and intragroup processes (such as team conflict and the distribution of power).

Because no extant research has addressed these dynamics, we provide a brief summary of literature examining differentiations in groups and literature on mentoring investigating justice perceptions to provide some insight into how mentoring relationships may influence their workgroup functioning. Based on literature, we identify two broad areas in which mentoring relationships may influence individuals' perceptions of workgroup functioning: by influencing perceptions of *workgroup effectiveness* (outcomes associated with productivity) and *intragroup processes* (the interactions that take place among team members, including communication patterns, conflict, and influence; Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998).

Mentoring Relationships and Workgroup Effectiveness

Although it can be expected that mentoring behavior as a form of helping behavior also influences group performance (see Ng & Van Dyne, 2005), there is no empirical research focusing on how individuals in the workgroup perceive mentoring relationships as contributing to, for example, group performance, efficiency, and productivity.

In mentoring literature, being involved in a mentoring relationship is associated with numerous individual benefits (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Eby et al., 2013). For example, studies have examined the relationship between mentoring and protégés'

levels of job satisfaction (Murphy & Ensher, 2001), income, and hierarchical position (Blickle, Witzki, & Schneider, 2009). Although to a lesser extent, mentoring scholars also investigated how mentors may benefit from their engagement in a mentoring relationship (Allen, Lentz, & Day, 2006; Bozionelos, 2004; Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2006). Mentoring is also often associated with individual performance benefits (e.g., Scandura, 1998; Waters, McCabe, Kiellerup, & Kiellerup, 2002). By supporting the protégé, the mentor may facilitate the protégé's task accomplishment, and this investment in the mentoring relationship may pay off in terms of a protégé's productivity and performance (Kirchmeyer, 2005). Thus, mentoring relationships may affect their workgroup functioning by contributing to protégés' performances.

Mentoring Relationships and Intragroup Processes

Another important way in which mentoring relationships may affect their workgroup is by influencing intragroup processes. We discuss two important intragroup processes below. Although a variety of processes could be considered, our focus here reflects our interest in team processes that are—in our view—most prominent to be influenced by mentoring relationships.

Justice Perceptions

Informal mentoring relationships are particularly prone to issues of fairness and access (i.e., who gets a mentor and why; Scandura, 1997) as those relationships are initiated on the basis of mutual identification, talents of the protégé (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Janssen, van Vuuren, & de Jong, 2014), and a mutual attraction or chemistry (Kram, 1985). As a result, individuals in teams with mentoring relationships can be sensitive to social comparison information, which can influence their reactions by affecting perceptions of fairness (see also Hooper & Martin, 2008). Thus, injustice perceptions may be a prominent consequence of mentoring relationships in a workgroup.

Organizational justice refers to employees' perceptions that they are treated fairly by their employing organization (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). Research shows that organizational justice is a multidimensional construct, consisting of three dimensions. First, distributive justice (Adams, 1965) refers to the perceived fairness of the outcomes that the employee receives (e.g., salary). Second, procedural justice (Greenberg, 1990) refers to the perceived fairness of the policies and procedures used to determine that final outcome. Last, interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986) refers to the treatment that an individual receives as decisions are made and can be

promoted by providing reasons for decisions and delivering news with sensitivity and respect. Employees' perceptions of injustice affect their attitudes and behavior toward the organization, including their performance, job satisfaction, cooperation, organizational citizenship behavior, and turnover intentions (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Tepper, 2001; Tepper & Taylor, 2003).

Specific mentoring behaviors may especially lead to perceptions of organizational injustice. For example, one of the most important career support functions of informal mentoring is sponsorship, which involves public support for the protégé in the form of actively nominating the protégé for lateral moves (Kram, 1985). This could be associated with both distributive (e.g., protégé moves to higher level in the organization) and procedural (e.g., protégé's career advancement is a result of mentor's informal discussions with superiors instead of formal procedures) injustice by coworkers. Although this proposition sounds reasonable, there are hardly empirical investigations on mentoring and organizational justice.

An exception to this is the work of Scandura (1997), which reports on a survey study about mentoring among 197 managers. She found that protégés and nonprotégés did not differ on their perceptions of distributive justice, suggesting that organizational outcomes were perceived as fair. However, protégés did perceive higher levels of procedural justice than nonprotégés. For those mentored, the received support was related to procedural and distributive justice, and the engagement in a mentoring relationship seemed to positively influence protégés' perceptions of organizational justice. Based on this study, it can be assumed that nonprotégés may perceive procedures as unfair because they have less access to information in the organization. Similar to that, Fagenson (1988) showed that employees having an informal or formal mentor experience more organizational policy influence, greater access to important people, and greater resource power than nonprotégés. In another study, Fagenson (1989) reported that protégés have more positive work experiences (e.g., recognition, satisfaction, promotions) than nonprotégés. Although these studies provide insight into differences between protégés and nonprotégés in terms of organizational justice and power in the organization, they provide no insight into how such feelings of organizational justice and power may result directly from perceiving a mentoring relationship in the workgroup.

Social Cohesion and Conflict

Group cohesion is regarded as an important determinant of performance behaviors and performance outcomes, and as being essential for the group's social integration (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003; Webber &

Donahue, 2007). Cohesion can be described as the commitment of team members to the team or the degree to which team members are attracted to each other (Webber & Donahue, 2007). Whereas equality is thought to enhance cooperation and cohesion in workgroups, the presence of differentiations in relationships within a team is expected to result in greater conflict, lower employee satisfaction, and poor team performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Hooper & Martin, 2008).

As informal mentoring relationships can be perceived as a differentiation in intergroup relationships in a team, it is possible that those relationships result in team conflicts: tensions between team members due to real or perceived differences (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). For example, when a team member compares his or her relationship with the relationship the protégé has with the mentor, he or she may come to the conclusion that his or her relationship is of lower quality than the relationship between the mentor and protégé. The perceptions of such differences may result in less positive team relationships and greater team conflict (see also Hooper & Martin, 2008). However, in the context of mentoring, no study has yet examined how social cohesion and conflict are affected by mentoring relationships in the workgroup.

To conclude, several group outcomes and processes could be influenced by the presence of an informal mentoring relationship in the workgroup. We conducted interviews to explore how mentoring relationships are experienced by coworkers in their direct work context and how this is related to their perceptions of workgroup functioning.

Method

Although mentoring research has provided rich insights and could be considered as mature theory in terms of Edmondson and McManus (2007), the specific topic of outsiders' perceptions has attracted little research attention and asks for an open-ended inquiry. Because questionnaires give participants limited means to communicate their experiences, an exploratory, qualitative approach was most appropriate. So far, studies focused on differences between protégés and nonprotégés tended to focus on one type of experience (e.g., organizational justice; Scandura, 1997). Semistructured interviews enabled us to broaden our understanding of coworkers' perspectives on mentoring relationships and help us to advance theory building of how mentoring relationships affect their workgroup. In the interviews, we focused on informal mentoring relationships as they are often less articulated and monitored than formal relationships (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), which makes them particularly interesting to study when examining coworkers' perceptions.

Participant Selection

Participants in this study fulfilled two roles. First, they served as *informants* as they provided us with information about how they perceive mentoring relationships in general (i.e., what mentoring relationships are according to outsiders). Second, they served as *respondents* as they provided us with information about their own observations of and experiences with a specific informal mentoring relationship between coworkers in their workgroup. A total of 21 participants from 21 knowledge-intensive organizations based in the Netherlands were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Patton, 1990). Participants were recruited by using the second author's professional network and through an invitational call in the second author's LinkedIn network (about 500 connections). Participants willing to share their observations on mentoring relationships had to meet four selection criteria to participate. These were communicated in the call, and all participants who responded met these criteria. First and foremost, they had to identify themselves as being an outsider of an informal mentoring relationship in their direct workgroup (i.e., team or department). Second, to limit the influence of varied occupational group characteristics on the nature of mentoring relationships and mentoring activities, we sampled white-collar employees holding clerical and professional positions. Third, participants had to work for at least 12 months in their current work team, to have a good understanding of the relationships within this team and the team's functioning. Last, we strived for a balance between males and females.

Participants were told that the goal of the study was to explore workgroup members' attitudes toward informal mentoring relationships and the consequences of these relationships. We provided participants with a definition (in Dutch), based on Chao, Walz, and Gardner (1992):

> An informal mentorship is defined as an intense work relationship between senior (mentor) and junior (protégé) organizational members. The mentor has experience and power in the organization and personally advises, counsels, coaches, and promotes the career development of the protégé. The relationship is not managed, structured, and formally recognized by the organization. It is a spontaneous relationship that occurs without external involvement from the organization. (p. 620)

This definition implies that participants reported on positive mentoring relationships. The terms "senior" and "junior" were broadly applied by participants, and they reported on mentoring relationships in which the mentor is higher than the protégé in the organizational hierarchy and/or more experienced than the protégé. With respect to sample size, interviews were

conducted until the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was evident. This point was reached with 21 interviews. Participants were not compensated for their participation.

All participants (10 men, 11 women) worked full-time and held at least an educational level of a 4-year college degree. They held professional and clerical positions and represented job categories such as senior consultant, policy advisor, and project assistant. Participants were aged between 25 and 64 years ($M = 41$ years). Average tenure within a team was 5.5 years, with a range from 14 months to 20 years. The organizations represented the following industries: health care ($n = 9$), education ($n = 4$), consulting ($n = 3$), government ($n = 3$), and engineering ($n = 2$). Previous participation in a mentoring relationship was not an inclusion criterion, so both participants with informal mentoring experiences as those without participated in the current study. However, none of the participants had previously been involved in a formal mentoring program, and none of their employing organizations had a formal mentoring program.

Data Collection

All interviews were audiotaped with permission. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Interviews typically lasted 45 min. The second author conducted the interviews and started each interview by asking the participant to describe his or her job. Participants were then asked to describe what they think of mentoring relationships in general, and to describe advantages and disadvantages of mentoring relationships. After this first part of the interview, in which participants served as informants, participants were asked to detail their experiences as coworkers of a specific informal mentoring relationship in their workgroup. For this mentoring relationship, participants were asked how they perceive the relationship and what they feel when they think about this relationship. Participants also described specific experiences with this mentoring relationship. Furthermore, we asked participants to describe consequences of the informal mentoring relationship. In this part, participants served as respondents as they described consequences of mentoring relationships for themselves, for other workgroup members, and for the organization as a whole. These consequences could be both positive and negative. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to share any other relevant information.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, except for names, which were replaced by functional codes. The data were imported in ATLAS.ti software

for tracking code creation. The analysis consisted of three coding activities: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). During the open coding phase, the first author reread the transcribed interviews line by line and segmented them into meaningful units of analysis, which consisted of single or multiple sentences. These codes were discussed with the other authors and modified until there was agreement on five broad categories of codes. As a first category, we distinguished the identification of informal mentoring relationships. This category consists of statements in which participants describe how they recognize informal mentoring relationships. Next, we distinguished categories reflecting the impact on the protégé (e.g., "I think it's a way to quickly know your way around in the organization"), the mentor (e.g., "For the mentor it is also good to practice leadership skills"), the workgroup and its members (e.g., "You save time, and time is money"), and themselves (e.g., "Sometimes I'm jealous, because they have such a strong relationship").

During the axial coding phase, the first author constructed an initial codebook, which provided detailed definitions of different subcategories within these five categories. We subdivided categories where necessary and compared subcategories with phenomena in the literature on mentoring and leader-member exchange differentiation (e.g., Scandura, 1997; Vidyarthi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010). These subcategories were labeled with codes to capture the meaning reflected by each group of comments (e.g., "Enhances Competencies" as a subcategory of "Impact on the Mentor"). We looked for common ideas and patterns in participants' responses, so subcategories represented by a single comment made by one participant were not included in this codebook. To assess intercoder reliability, the third author served as second coder next to the first author. Both coders individually applied the codebook to a quarter of the total sample of responses. This resulted in Cohen's κs of .90 (identification), .88 (impact on the protégé), 1.00 (impact on the mentor), .92 (impact on the workgroup and organization), and .80 (impact on workgroup members themselves).

Last, selective coding was applied. In this activity, we looked for connections between the categories, to find the core themes in our data. In this phase, we found out that both "workgroup performance" and "workgroup climate" were main themes in participants' narratives and that our previously defined categories were related to these two themes. First, participants talked about how mentoring relationships affect mentors' and protégés' individual functioning, and how mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's efficiency and effectivity (categorized under workgroup performance). Second, participants' told that mentoring relationships affect the atmosphere in the workgroup, its communication, and decision-making processes, and the distribution of power within the workgroup (categorized under workgroup climate). Based on these two themes, we built our "Results" section.

Results

Participants diverged in their reactions to informal mentoring relationships in their workgroup. About half of the participants seemed to have a balanced view, describing both positive and negative examples of their experiences with such relationships. As an example, one of these participants stated that he thinks mentoring is good for the organization, but that he is also a bit skeptical about the concept of mentoring, as it may create dependence of the protégé. Two participants were mainly positive in their accounts, stating that mentoring relationships contribute to organizational development, create a relaxed work environment, and ensure quality toward customers or clients. In contrast, three of the participants were mainly negative in their accounts, finding mentoring, for example, "unnecessary," because there are enough other colleagues who you can consult, perceive it as time-consuming, and worry that private talks between mentor and protégé invade the execution of work accomplishment.

Participants' perceptions of the concept of mentoring in general and their evaluations of experiences with specific mentoring relationships were not always related. Some participants were mainly positive when talking about their general perceptions on mentoring relationships but were mainly negative in the description of a specific mentoring relationship. Almost every participant talked about the impact of mentoring relationships on an individual (consequences for both protégés and mentors), workgroup, and organizational level.

Theme 1: Impact on Workgroup Performance

Participants perceive that mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's performance in multiple ways, both positive and negative. The core of these accounts is that mentoring relationships affect the mentor's and protégé's individual performance and the workgroup's efficiency and effectiveness. Besides that, few participants extended this line of thinking and talked about the consequences of mentoring relationships on an organizational level.

Protégés' and mentors' individual performance. On an individual level, mentor–protégé relationships are believed to positively affect the individual functioning of both protégé and mentor. First, what is striking is that almost every participant explained that mentoring relationships improve mentors' functioning, as they help to enhance competencies for mentors. Although the improvement of a protégé's functioning is in the core of most traditional mentoring definitions (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011),

only four participants in this study explicitly mentioned the improvement of a protégé's performance as a positive consequence of mentoring. They explained that a mentoring relationship is helpful for protégés as it contributes to their personal and professional development:

> An employee is then encouraged to also work on things that he or she could improve. So I think it is a very positive movement for new employees or for employees who need to work on certain competencies. I think that through coaching, you can live up to a promise. (Female, age 53, health care)

With respect to the mentor, however, almost every participant talked about the positive consequences of the relationship. Participants discussed how mentors can enhance their management competencies through their engagement in the mentoring relationship, how they can learn new skills, and how they can acquire new knowledge from the protégé:

> I think it's also just your job to guide newcomers in the organization. But then again, I also think that a new colleague can bring in new knowledge and insight, and then the mentor can be the very first to benefit from this. (Male, age 28, consulting)

Thus, participants in this study seem to conceptualize mentoring relationships in a reciprocal way, contributing not only to the protégé's functioning but also especially to the mentor's functioning.

With respect to the protégé, participants explained how mentoring relationships may indirectly improve the protégé's functioning in both positive and negative ways. First, participants see mentoring as an important way to familiarize protégés in their organization. Many participants assumed that a mentoring relationship helps newcomers to socialize in the organization and to adapt to manners and practices in the organization. Participants also discussed that especially young starters need to acquire experience in the work field and to put theoretical knowledge into practice, and that the mentor can help in this process:

> I think it's very good. I think that especially for employees who are not that experienced in a certain field, or for example, just left school, or get a new function, I think it's very helpful then to learn from someone who is more experienced. I think that works better than learning it from theory. (Female, age 25, health care)

Second, participants described how the mentoring relationship can provide a safe context to learn for the protégé, which will help to improve the

protégé's functioning. When discussing this aspect of mentoring relationships, the role of interpersonal comfort (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005) or psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) was central. In line with previous work on high-quality relationships and psychological safety (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009), participants stated that the informal nature of the relationship ensures psychological safety, and in that way offers a safe environment to discuss things that matter for the protégé:

> I think it's especially nice for a new employee that he or she can fall back on the same person. That makes that you are a little less afraid to make mistakes. And that will give you more confidence, I think. (Female, age 27, health care)

In the context of a mentoring relationship, according to participants, the protégé knows that the mentoring relationship is safe for interpersonal risk taking and that it is allowed to make mistakes, which will improve the protégé's functioning. This provision of protection is a classical function of mentoring (Kram, 1985).

As a negative consequence for the protégé, however, the provision of protection is sometimes seen as concealing the poor functioning of the protégé, in that way, hindering the improvement of his or her functioning. This may raise questions of organizational justice and fairness among coworkers as they may fear that the protégé uses the relationship for personal gain (Greenberg, 1990). Participants, for example, described how mentors seem to back protégés up, even when they are not working well enough. They talked about having the feeling that the protégé benefits from the help of the mentor and can keep up appearances of good functioning:

> I suppose the mentor thinks they have a friendship. But the protégé needs him, and he just uses the mentor. That's the way I see it. . . . If they would disclose their mentoring relationship, it would be over for the protégé. So, if my supervisor would know that the protégé knows that little and is that little competent, he would be send away. (Male, age 56, engineering)

Most often, this involved mentoring relationships between mentors and protégés with a different status in the organization, though not necessarily a hierarchical difference as it also involved a more informal status difference, based on the mentor's experience.

Next, participants worried that the close bond between the mentor and protégé can impede critical feedback, which may also harm the protégé's functioning. Several participants questioned whether there is enough professional distance between mentor and protégé, to provide each other with

honest and critical feedback. In line with previous work (Kidd, Hirsh, & Jackson, 2004), participants find it important that mentors are frank and honest to their protégés:

> When you are too closely associated with the protégé, or when the work relationship is more like a friendship. Then you act less critical and maybe you don't discuss important feedback anymore. Then the protégé would benefit more from a neutral person. (Female, age 51, health care)

Thus, outsiders see mentoring relationships as relationships in which the multiplexity of roles may have an impact on the feedback that is given (see also Janssen et al., 2016).

Workgroup efficiency. On the workgroup's level, efficiency was a core theme in the perceived impact of mentoring relationships. Some participants assumed that workgroups with mentoring relationships work more efficiently than workgroups with nonprotégés as the protégé is sooner able to be settled in a job and to work at full capacity:

> I think that for the organization, it is important that a new employee learns the ropes as soon as possible. Then he or she can function optimal. The sooner the better I think, because for the organization there is only one thing that counts: time is money. (Female, age 27, health care)

At the opposite of the foregoing finding, however, participants also noticed two threats in terms of workgroup efficiency. First, participants explained that mentoring relationships actually may lead to an inefficient way of working. Partly this is because they believe that mentors and protégés spend too much time on other things than working: "What also is annoying is that they sometimes have a chat with each other for three quarters of an hour. I don't think that's something we want" (male, age 64, engineering), and "It influences the workgroup. They are always together and sometimes they spend not enough time on their work, I think" (female, age 54, health care). Other participants explained that the guidance of the protégé takes too much time, and that this does not necessarily result in more output from the protégé. Participants also questioned whether mentoring is always needed: "Sometimes I'm wondering why they do things together and not solo. I mean, they are both highly paid professionals and now it costs twice as much because they do their jobs together" (male, age 27, government).

Second, many participants explained that mentoring causes an extra workload for the mentor (Allen et al., 1997), because informal mentoring is a form

of organizational citizenship behavior, which is performed besides normal job duties:

> And I think that in the case of informal mentoring, you more easily pass a limit with work load and that you invest too much time in guiding your protégé, which may cause that other tasks are put on the sidelines. (Female, age 25, health care)

As this quote shows, especially in the case of informal mentoring relationships, the mentor's workload may be higher, as there is no clear structure or agreements on how much time is spent on coaching the protégé. Thus, this form of organizational citizenship behavior may have costs for the mentor (Bergeron, Shipp, Rosen, & Furst, 2013)and in that way may threaten a workgroup's productivity.

Organizational outcomes. Last, few participants also perceived consequences of mentoring relationships on an organizational level. As noted by Bryant (2005), mentoring relationships can contribute to increasing organizational knowledge creation and sharing. Also in the current study, some participants perceived mentoring as a form of quality management for the organization, contributing to its future development. For example, mentoring relationships help organizations to keep their knowledge up to date: "I think for an organization, it's a way to keep your knowledge up to date, because mentors interact with new people. It also brings diversity into a team. I think new knowledge is very important for an organization" (female, age 25, health care). Participants also stated that mentoring relationships ensure organizations of highly qualified people and that these relationships encourage knowledge sharing among employees. As one participant stated, "Older employees are sometimes a little bit stuck, so to encourage knowledge sharing, mentoring should be incorporated in an organization's policy" (male, age 36, health care). Last, in line with Allen and O'Brien (2006), few participants mentioned that mentoring relationships can be beneficial for the organization's reputation, as they contribute to a good functioning of employees and a higher quality of work: "I think that if you take good care of your newcomers, this also leads to a positive image of your organization" (male, age 49, education).

Theme 2: Impact on Workgroup Climate

Next to their explanations of how mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's *performance*, participants also discussed how mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's *climate*. As a positive consequence, some participants reported that informal mentoring relationships are good

for the atmosphere in the workgroup. They state that the positive work attitudes of mentors and protégés and their high-quality relationships contribute to a happy and relaxed work environment: "It always has a positive contribution to the atmosphere. When they have good contact, this also is contagious for the rest of the department" (female, age 51, health care). However, most accounts on the influence of mentoring relationships on the workgroup's climate were merely negative in nature. The core of these accounts is that mentoring relationships are seen as a subgroup, and that mentoring relationships are associated with power issues.

The mentor and protégé as a subgroup. In many of the accounts given by participants, it became clear that mentors and protégés were perceived as a unit (see Jones, 1999), or a subgroup in the larger group. Coworkers discussed various consequences of this. First, the most prominent theme related to this was that coworkers feel excluded by the mentor and protégé:

> We work in a team, but within that team, you sometimes have sub teams. And as it happens, they often are placed in the same team. And if you're also in that team as a third person, that feels unpleasant. I don't want to be a third wheel. . . . Actually, I feel left out. (Male, age 47, consultancy)

Examples given of behaviors that made participants feel that the mentor and protégé isolate from the group were that the mentor and protégé only talk about a shared interest, speak another language, have private chats, or make insider jokes that only they understand. In this sense, mentors and protégés create a faultline in the group: They divide themselves—based on attributes such as a shared interest or language—from the larger group (Lau & Murnighan, 1998).

Second, participants talked about feelings of distrust associated with mentoring relationships. Because the mentor and protégé are perceived as a unit or subgroup, participants assume that the mentor and protégé share everything with each other and even share matters told in confidence by the participants:

> Yeah, I think I am more careful in sharing things because I know that they tell each other everything. . . . And that has to do with trust. Because you never know to what extent they discuss things with each other. (Female, age 25, health care)

Last, participants talked about their feelings of envy. Participants described their thoughts and emotions that resulted from the mentor and protégé having a special bond. Especially, participants who stated that they have had no

mentor in the past, or have no close relationship with a colleague at the moment, were envious about the subgroup formed by the mentor and protégé: "Sometimes I'm jealous, because they have such a strong relationship. I miss that sometimes" (female, age 25, government). Although this participant used the word *jealous*, envy and jealousy are two different concepts (Parrott & Smith, 1993; Vecchio, 2000). Comments belonging to this category do not reflect participants' fear to lose the relationship with the protégé or the mentor (which would reflect jealousy), but rather their thoughts and emotions in response to the perception of the protégé having a mentor (which reflects envy).

Mentoring relationships are associated with power. Another important theme in the narratives of participants was that mentoring relationships are associated with power. In line with previous conceptualizations (Ragins, 1997), participants explained not only how the mentor and protégé gain power in the workgroup as a result of their mentoring relationship (power external to the relationship), but they also worried about power issues within the mentoring relationship, as a protégé may become too independent on the mentor (power internal to the relationship). The perception of mentors and protégés as units gives them power in the workgroup. In literature, mentors are seen as powerful employees (Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988), and research shows that protégés also gain power in their organization because of their involvement in a mentoring relationship (Fagenson, 1988; Kram, 1985). In the current study, participants also believed that, as a result of their bonding, both mentors and protégés gain power to influence their environment.

On one hand, their power has negative connotations, as mentors and protégés were believed to predominate group processes. Participants explained that the mentor and protégé often share the same opinions and way of working. Several participants believed that this leads them to be too dominant in group processes, such as decision-making processes: "So, together they are very strong. That's the point. . . . Sometimes that's hard, because it's always the two of them, so you don't easily argue with them, by yourself" (female, age 55, education). Next, participants believed that the protégé may have access to information via the mentor, which may give the protégé then more power in the organization than nonprotégés. Again, this raises questions of organizational justice: "Sometimes it feels unfair. . . . Because she is so close to her mentor, and her mentor is quite a prominent team member, I think she sometimes gets a preferential treatment. That's the feeling we get sometimes" (female, age 55, health care).

On the other hand, few participants explained that the power associated with mentoring relationships may have positive consequences as well, as it

empowers mentors and protégés to speak up. Together they have the courage to raise matters in, for example, meetings: " . . . I remember that once there was a team leader who was low-performing. They were then the first who had the courage to give their opinion. Together they dared to come up with it, because of their shared opinion" (female, age 25, health care). In such a case, mentoring relationships may have positive consequences on workgroup voice (Morrison, 2011) and provide the workgroup and organization with feedback. Few participants also mentioned how they can use the subgroup of the mentor–protégé relationship, as it gives them also more power in, for example, decision-making processes. Participants explained how they sometimes use the mentoring relationship for own purposes:

> I work in quite a political organization. There's a lot of decision-making going on. And suppose I would express my opinion and I speak the mentor or protégé about that, then I already have their approval. . . . I always get approval of both of them, because they'll discuss it with each other. Then it's a matter of lobbying to convince the rest of the team, but I already have the two of them on my side. (Male, age 36, health care)

Participants also discussed power issues they expect *within* the mentoring relationship. A prominent theme in participants' accounts was their worries that a protégé runs the risk of becoming too dependent on the mentor:

> It also has disadvantages. I don't know if the new colleague is able to think for herself, because she hangs on to her mentor. I'm not sure if she is able to make decisions on her own, without falling back on her mentor. (Men, age 36, health care)

Participants described that mentors can be too dominant in imposing their way of working on the protégé, providing protégés with only little autonomy (see also Janssen et al., 2013). They described how protégés can be too focused on their mentor and are sometimes not critical to their mentors' style of working, and then become copycats of their mentors, because they do not learn to develop their own way of working.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to provide insight into coworkers' perspectives on informal mentoring relationships in their workgroup and to describe and explain how their experiences with these relationships are related to their perceptions of workgroup functioning. The results of this qualitative study show that coworkers believe that mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's

functioning in two ways: by influencing their workgroup's *performance* and by influencing their workgroup's *climate*. Data from our interviews enrich our understanding of how mentoring relationships affect their social environment and emphasize the importance of investigating the interplay between mentoring relationships and their immediate context (Chandler et al., 2011; Janssen et al., 2016). The present study has several implications for scholars studying mentoring relationships in workgroups. These implications concern (a) the way in which consequences of mentoring relationships in workgroups should be conceptualized, (b) the variables that should be included when studying mentoring relationships in workgroups, and (c) intragroup processes that should be studied more specifically in future research.

First, the present study shows that consequences of mentoring relationships in workgroups should be conceptualized not only in terms of instrumental consequences but also in terms of relational consequences. Coworkers believe that mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's functioning in two ways. From an instrumental perspective, coworkers were mainly concerned with how mentoring relationships affect their workgroup's performance, in terms of individual performance of the mentor and protégé, and in terms of workgroup efficiency and effectiveness. Applying a relational perspective, coworkers' accounts related to how the workgroup's climate in terms of atmosphere, decision-making processes, and distribution of power within the workgroup was affected by mentoring relationships. Until now, most researchers applied social exchange theory to study mentoring relationships (Ragins, 2012; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). Although this may be a good lens to study the functional consequences of mentoring in their workgroup (e.g., effectiveness of mentoring relationships in terms of input and output), it leaves little space for relational consequences such as how mentoring affects coworkers' strivings for connection and the need to belong (Janssen et al., 2016; Ragins, 2012). Thus, we encourage researchers to incorporate both lines into their work on the consequences of mentoring relationships.

Second, in terms of instrumental consequences, this study shows that researchers should focus on consequences of mentoring relationships not only in terms of individual performance but also in terms of workgroup performance. On the individual level, participants described how mentoring relationships affect the functioning of both mentors and protégés. Many of these views align with findings derived from studies in which mentors and protégés were the focus of inquiry. For example, in line with previous findings, coworkers believe that mentoring helps protégés to familiarize (Janssen et al., 2013; Kram, 1985) and provides a safe context to learn (Janssen et al., 2013). Strikingly, one of the most important themes here was that mentoring enhances mentors' competencies (Allen et al., 1997; Janssen et al., 2014).

This underscores the importance to more closely examine mentors' motives and outcomes (e.g., Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Janssen et al., 2014) and questions one-sided conceptualizations in which the mentor is a purely giving partner for the protégé (Janssen et al., 2016; Ragins, 2012). In addition to these individual-level consequences, this study sheds light on the importance of studying how mentoring may have positive and negative workgroup-level consequences. Future studies should adopt a microsystem perspective (Chandler et al., 2011) and investigate not only how mentoring affects *perceptions* of individual and workgroup performance but also how it affects *actual* individual and workgroup performance scores.

Third, from a relational perspective, this study shows yet another way through which mentoring relationships may affect their workgroup functioning, as participants reported several consequences of mentoring relationships which related to their workgroup's climate. Given the prominent results on how mentoring relationships affect climate perceptions in this study, we suggest to add intragroup processes such as team cohesion, conflict, or justice as variables in research on mentoring and (team) outcomes.

Fourth, future research should further examine specific intragroup processes related to mentoring in workgroups. A prominent result is that participants reported on a broad spectrum of both positive and negative consequences when they talked about the influence of mentoring on the workgroup's performance; however, when they talked about the impact of mentoring on the workgroup's climate, they were more critical and negative in their accounts. One important way in which a workgroup's climate is affected by a mentoring relationship is that the distinction between mentored and nonmentored professionals may lead to a faultline in the workgroup (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Coworkers outside of the mentoring relationship perceive the mentor and protégé as a subgroup within their workgroup and feel excluded by the mentor and protégé. Research shows that exclusion may produce both prosocial and antisocial reactions (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). Rejection may lead to efforts aimed at reconnection (e.g., doing favors, showing that one has high relational value), or to anger and frustrations. The current study mainly showed how a perceived rejection rather leads to feelings of frustrations than behaviors aimed at reconnection. Future research may more closely examine how workgroup members deal with their feelings of exclusion on the longer term. Mentoring scholars should also more closely examine how specific group compositions influence reactions to mentoring relationships. For example, a mentoring relationship between two men in a workgroup in which the other members are women may trigger quite different dynamics than a mentoring relationship between a man and woman in a group which is composed of both men and women (see Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009; Lau & Murnighan, 1998).

Another intragroup process that deserves more research attention is the distribution of power in workgroups with mentoring relationships. Results show how coworkers associate mentoring relationships with power. Because of their power, mentoring relationships can influence decision-making processes in workgroups. This may facilitate such processes or stimulate workgroup voice (Morrison, 2011). However, most accounts related to power were negative in nature. For example, in line with the work of Ragins and Scandura (1997), participants explained how protégés' dependency may be a dysfunctional aspect of mentoring relationships. Also, mentoring relationships seem to be associated with issues of organizational justice and power, as they were assumed to sometimes conceal poor functioning of the protégé and give protégés access to information in the organization which is not available for other coworkers. These findings complement earlier work of Scandura (1997) and Fagenson (1988). Related to these issues, future research could more closely examine how relationship characteristics influence how mentoring actions are being perceived. Supervisors have more power and ability to sponsor their protégés than peer mentors of equal status have, and this may influence participants' perceptions of justice. Likewise, the current study raises questions on how the quality of workgroup members' relationships with both mentor and protégé is related to justice perceptions. Future research may examine this in further detail.

Limitations

Several limitations of the current study should be noted. First, related to the methodology utilized, participants were asked to provide examples of experiences with informal mentoring relationships. A salient result was that they reported mainly negative consequences for themselves. An explanation for the omnipresence of these negative consequences is that positive forms of coworker behaviors are the norm in organizations (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). So, when employees make sense of informal mentoring relationships in a negative way, such perceptions and experiences stand out during retrospective research settings. Future research on this topic would benefit from the use of diary studies, for example, with the Rochester Interaction Record (Reis & Wheeler, 1991), that could cover positive, neutral, and negative experiences with a particular relationship in natural settings.

It is also important to note that the results may be limited to specific organizational or national cultures. For example, this study was conducted in the Netherlands, and the findings may thus be limited to European cultural norms. As Ragins and Verbos (2007) explained, Europeans tend to see mentoring as a means to personal development and mutual growth, whereas

Americans tend to see mentoring as a means to advance protégés' careers. In line with this, sponsorship of the protégé may be viewed as an appropriate mentoring function in the United States, but may be seen as a form of favoritism in European cultures. These cultural norms could be an alternative explanation for the mainly negative views of participants of this study on mentoring relationships. In a similar way, scholars may also examine how an organization's culture (e.g., hierarchy, learning climate) may influence coworkers' perceptions of mentoring processes: Do perceptions of employees in self-managing teams, for example, differ from those in organizations with clear hierarchical relationships?

We also encourage mentoring scholars to further examine how workgroup members' experiences are dependent on their previous experiences with mentoring relationships. This study showed that participants' general perceptions of mentoring relationships and their evaluations of specific experiences with mentoring relationships are not necessarily related. Participants' previous mentoring experiences construe their mentoring schemas (Ragins & Verbos, 2007), and these cognitive maps of what mentoring is and how mentors and protégés typically behave may influence their perceptions of what they perceive as appropriate mentor and protégé behaviors. The exact relationship between participants' previous mentoring experiences and their current evaluations was however not taken into account in this study, and future research should focus on this.

Last, our definition allowed participants to report on a broad range of mentoring relationships. However, it did not specifically incorporate perceptions of the traditional senior–junior mentoring (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001), supervisory mentoring (Pan, Sun, & Chow, 2011), or developmental networks (Dobrow et al., 2011); future research is needed on coworkers' perceptions of these specific forms of developmental relationships.

Practical Implications

This study offers research-based insights into how outsiders perceive mentoring relationships. This results in recommendations for individuals engaged in mentoring relationships and their managers. First, it is important that mentors, protégés, and their managers should be aware of the equivocal views that workgroup members can have of mentoring relationships. Our findings show that workgroup members report both positive and negative consequences of mentoring relationships for the workgroup. Given the notion that workgroup members identified a range of positive consequences of mentoring relationships (especially in terms of workgroup performance), we recommend managers to encourage mentoring activities in their workgroup. However, when

communicating the positive consequences of mentoring practices, managers should be aware that mentoring practices may also bring perceptions of power, exclusion, and organizational injustice to a workgroup. For managers and mentors, it is therefore important to clearly communicate about mentoring practices, and to explain followed procedures (procedural justice), given rewards (distributive justice), and reasons for this (interactional justice). Transparency about mentoring relationships and activities in a workgroup seems to be a key recommendation to ensure that the workgroup can benefit from these relationships.

Also, it is important that mentors, protégés, and their managers make sure that the mentoring relationship will not become an isolated subgroup. For both protégés and nonprotégés, it is important to build a solid developmental network (see Higgins, 2000; Van Emmerik, 2004), and HR practitioners and workgroup managers could organize activities that encourage this. For example, managers could organize peer discussion groups and job rotation programs to facilitate employees' networking opportunities (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). This may prevent protégés from becoming too dependent on their mentor and may foster nonprotégés' feelings of belongingness, and in that way prevent them from feeling excluded by the members of the mentoring relationship.

Prevention of subgroup polarization is important for everyone involved, as such types of conflicts may decrease the effectiveness of organizations, obstruct the cohesion of teams, and diminish the potential of developing healthy interpersonal relationships. Our study has shown that the distinction between mentored and nonmentored professionals may lead to a faultline (Lau & Murnighan, 1998, 2005) within a team. It becomes a factor for subgroup identification and provides a possible threat to the functioning of the team. For those responsible for group functioning, it may be worthwhile to explore whether the initially promising emergence of mentoring roles at work runs this risk. The question then becomes, do we have enough in common as a team to cope with the difference that we see between mentored and nonmentored colleagues? If not, the solution should not be searched for in the direction of abandoning thriving developmental relationships, but to look for other ways to bind the group together. Do not let people get isolated, but find ways to "crisscross" (Mäs, Flache, Takács, & Jehn, 2013) the boundaries and make sure that all people at least share some attributes (e.g., demographics, interests, or identification with the organization).

By definition, relationships include some while excluding others. We unpacked the positive and negative sides of these dynamics for one crucial type of developmental relationships: mentoring. Knowing these dynamics, organizations need careful and wise policies to benefit from the undeniable

advantages of mentoring while staying away from its potential drawbacks for both insiders and outsiders.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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