Initial motives and organizational context enabling female mentors' engagement in formal mentoring – A qualitative study from the mentors' perspective

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring aimed at supporting young people and their development shows promising results, but its delivery is threatened by the difficulty of recruiting sufficient numbers of mentors and keeping them engaged over time. The aim of this study was to help overcome this problem by examining female mentors' motives for engaging in formal voluntary mentoring of young women, and exploring how organizations can facilitate these mentors' satisfaction in staying engaged over time. Based on qualitative interviews with 12 mentors in a Swedish non-governmental organization, the Girls Zone, we show six categories of mentor motives related to initial motivation for engagement: self-interested reasons, empowering women, being a responsible citizen, sense of compassion, self-awareness, and longing for meaningfulness. In addition, we show five categories related to the organizational work of satisfying mentors: a win-win relationship, a feeling of ambivalence despite clear responsibilities and contributions, customized support and guidance, a caring organizational identity, and a commitment to pursue with feelings of duty and emotional connection. Using self-determination theory as the framework to guide our understanding of the findings, we conclude that mentors' motivations for engaging as mentors are linked to the fulfillment of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Practical recommendations are offered in light of the findings.

1. Introduction

In order to experience healthy development, people have a need for belonging, relatedness, and social interaction with family, friends, and the community (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Young people have a particular need for adults in their growth process to establish a healthy development (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). Formal mentoring programs constitute a public health intervention aimed at establishing relatedness and involving adults in young people's development, and promising results have been reported (Larsson, Pettersson, Skoog, & Eriksson, 2016). Mentoring organizations often have difficulties recruiting and retaining mentors (Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 2013), resulting in the number of young people requesting mentors exceeding the supply (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). Waiting times as long as two years can occur (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, 2009). Strategies are clearly needed to develop adults' involvement in young people's healthy development, to close the mentoring gap. In this process, a deeper understanding of

motivational factors for engagement from the mentor's perspective is of central importance (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). This information can be used to facilitate mentor recruitment, mentor satisfaction, and commitment to mentoring in the future (Stukas & Tanti, 2005). Motivations can be suitably examined with qualitative techniques in a context where adults choose to become involved and to continue engaging over time. Although mentors play unique roles in the mentor-protégé relationship and are necessary for mentoring to take place, remarkably few studies have focused on the mentor perspective. The current study was developed against this backdrop. We examined motivations among female mentors aged 24–40 years in a community-based mentoring (CBM) program organized by the Girls Zone, a Swedish non-governmental organization. The Girls Zone arranges one-year relationships between protégés (young women aged 12–25) and female mentors. The mentor and protégé are matched only with regard to age, with a ten-year difference within each dyad. The stated goals of the program are to prevent mental health problems, promote equality, and prevent drug abuse by strengthening young women's self-esteem, self-confidence, and trust (The Girls Zone, 2013). Mentors engage in mentorship as volunteers, without rewards, and are welcome regardless of their formal educational level.

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The organization recommends that the dyads meet for about one and a half hours every two weeks for one year.

The Girls Zone is of particular interest, because in sharp contrast to many other mentoring organizations (Stukas et al., 2013) it has a surplus of potential mentors — a line of female mentors waiting to be trained and matched with a female protégé. Moreover, the female mentors stay in the organization for at least a year, which is the recommended minimal duration of mentor relationships (Rhodes, Lowe, Litchfield, & Walsh-Samp, 2008). The apparent high intrinsic motivation behind being a mentor and remaining in the Girls Zone suggests that the mentors experience benefits, likely including satisfaction in the mentoring role. We aimed to provide deeper understanding of young adult women's motives to begin mentoring for young women in a formal mentoring program and to continue their engagement over time. We used self-determination theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework to guide our understanding of underlying motivations among mentors. In a SDT perspective, it is these motivations which bring about the high level of engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

1.1. Self-determination theory as a theoretical framework

SDT is a meta theory of human motivation which states that people have three basic psychological needs, varying in degree of self-determination: autonomy (experiencing choice and volition of one's own actions), competence (experiencing success in challenging tasks and influencing one's desired outcomes), and relatedness (experiencing connection, mutual respect, caring, and reliance in relationships with others) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These three psychological needs promote a willingness among people to explore and engage in contexts that are assumed to nurture their psychological needs. This facilitates people's self-motivation and effective functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Hence, one of the key questions for scholars in the field of SDT is to examine how social contexts facilitate or undermine people's experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn is linked to their motivation and engagement.

SDT distinguishes between two different kinds of human motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. Intrinsic motivation emerges spontaneously from the fulfillment of basic psychological needs within people themselves, and exists in the relations between individuals and activities. High intrinsic motivation to perform a behavior increases the likelihood that the target behavior will be repeated. Extrinsic motivation, conversely, refers to doing something because it leads to a preferable outcome, or an external reward such as money. SDT has previously been used to examine motivational factors among volunteers and has received empirical support as a model of volunteer satisfaction (e.g., Bidee et al., 2013; Oostlander, Güntert, & Wehner, 2014). However, to our knowledge, it has never been used to study motivation among mentors engaged in mentoring young people.

1.2. Motives to engage as a mentor

Although far from exhaustive, previous studies have revealed important insights into mentors' motivations, including reasons for becoming and enjoying being a mentor. First, most mentors mention more than one motivation to engage as a mentor (Stukas, Daly, & Clary, 2006), and they choose to become mentors for a variety of reasons (Gehrke, Jenkins, Miskovetz, & Wray, 2006). Mentors who perceive their mentoring relationships as motivated by internal motivations are more positive than those who perceive external motivations, and their engagement is more likely to be long-term (Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005).

In a study by Strapp et al. (2014), mentors in junior- or senior-age school-based mentoring (SBM) reported motives including *gaining hands-on experience* and *experiencing the gratification that comes from watching a mentee grow and develop*. According to SDT, these motives can be related to the need for autonomy. A quantitative study conducted by Caldarella, Gomm, Shatzer, and Wall (2010) examined motives among school-based mentors (aged 21 years and over). The need for autonomy was present in motives such as *career enhancement*, the need for competence in motives such as *seeking learning experiences to better understand themselves and others*, and the need for relatedness in *humanitarian concerns*.

Previous research has examined motives among volunteer mentors in school-based settings (e.g., Caldarella et al., 2010; Strapp et al., 2014). However, CBM programs face challenges different from SBM programs in terms of factors including activities, outcomes, and mentor characteristics. Mentors in CBM are involved for longer periods of time and experience more pressure to determine activities, making recruitment of mentors more difficult (Herrera & Karcher, 2013). In addition, SBM more often attracts older or youth mentors whereas CBM more often attracts those aged 22–49 (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000). Motives among CBM mentors are less well-known. Thus, there is a need for research into both initial motives and factors that influence mentors to uphold their commitment (Stukas et al., 2013). Volunteering research has shown that motives differ between individuals depending on gender, mission, target group, and context (Wilson, 2012). Based on these facts, there is a clear need to identify motives for mentoring specifically among CBM female mentors engaging in positive development among young women, but there is little current evidence to answer this question.

A study of community-based mentors working with disadvantaged young people mentioned reasons for being a mentor such as *giving back to the community* and *strengthening social relations* (Evans, 2005). According to SDT, these motives can be understood as a need for relatedness among mentors. Moreover, the need for competence may be seen in the same study in the reported motive *gaining career experience.* A survey of 2000 mentors conducted in 2005 by MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership reported five motives in the following order from most frequent to least frequent: 1) to help young people succeed, 2) to make a difference in someone's life, 3) to give back to the community, 4) religious and spiritual reasons, and 5) having been helped by someone else when young (O'Connor, 2006).

Gender differences in mentor engagement are noteworthy. Women have been found to be motivated by opportunities for self-esteem enhancement, value expression (Stukas et al., 2013), and personal gratification (Gehrke et al., 2006). Young female mentors (aged 18–25) volunteer as mentors for reasons including wanting to be a positive influence for adolescent girls (Dowd, Harden, & Beauchamp, 2015), which can be interpreted both as a need for relatedness and a need for competence, based on their expertise as women who had previously experienced being teenagers.

Although initial motives are important in the recruitment process of engaging mentors, they differ from those which influence retention (Stukas & Tanti, 2005). Once mentors have been recruited, they are affected by contextual effects such as the organizational structure. Thus, it is crucial to get a deeper understanding of the interplay between individual motivations and organizational characteristics in order to determine how these promote mentor satisfaction and hence consolidate mentors' intentions to continue their engagement. This information can be used to understand motivation at both the individual and the organizational level.

1.3. Organizational context influencing motivation among mentors

Experience and level of satisfaction among mentors differ depending on the mission and the organization's context, including program infrastructure, design, practices, and ways of managing the mentors (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Stukas & Tanti, 2005). Thus, there is a need for research into the relationship between the organizational context and satisfaction in mentoring programs (Kulik & Megidna, 2011; Stukas et al., 2013). What kind of approach in the