



The role of personality in relationship closeness, developer assistance, and career success

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ABSTRACT

We investigate the role of relationship closeness, which is adapted from social network theory, in developmental relationships using a sample of 278 full-time working individuals. We theorize that personality, operationalized with the Five Factor Model, is associated with relationship closeness which is positively related to developer assistance received, which in turn is linked to objective and subjective measures of career success. In general, results supported our hypothesized model, although personality had direct effects on career success beyond the indirect effects through relationship closeness and developer assistance. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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Since Kram's (1985) seminal work on developmental relationships, defined as a relationship in which a more experienced individual (mentor) assists in the development of a younger organization member (protégé), numerous studies have investigated whether developmental relationships influence career success. A recent meta-analysis found developmental assistance to associate positively with both objective and subjective measures of career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Little is known, however, about what motivates developers, such as mentors and direct supervisors, to assist their protégés. Nonetheless, scholars have speculated that relationship closeness, defined as the level of intimacy and communication frequency in the relationship influences developmental assistance provided to protégés (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Allen et al., 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Higgins & Kram, 2001).

In the field of mentoring, Higgins and Kram (2001) used concepts from tie strength (Granovetter, 1973) to argue that stronger developmental relationship ties enhance the value of the developmental relationship for the protégés. Tie strength, or relationship closeness, consists of how often individuals communicate with one another and their level of emotional closeness. As relationship closeness is related to career success, scholars have called for research to understand sources and consequences of relationship closeness in developmental relationships (Siebert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001).

In this study, we theorized that relationship strength influences the amount of psychosocial and career assistance provided to the protégé and thus the extent to which the developmental relationship enhances the protégé's career. We drew upon Higgins and Kram's (2001) framework and proposed that personality is an antecedent of the closeness of the developmental relationship. Personality, defined as behavioral tendencies, is conceptualized as the Five-Factor Model (FFM), which represents a broad description of the human characteristics of extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Although not extensive, some research indicates that personality influences developmental relationships (Turban & Lee, 2007), social network characteristics (Bozionelos, 2003)

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as well as career success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). We have, however, little insight into how personality impacts career success. We extend such research and investigate whether a mechanism through which personality influences career success is its influence on the quality of development relationships formed.

This study was conducted in Singapore where relationships might be particularly crucial in career outcomes. Scholars have noted the importance that individuals in some cultural groups, such as Asian communities, place on the opinions of others when making career choices (Schultheiss, 2003). Singapore is a collectivistic society where people stress relatedness within groups (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Because the self is considered as part of a larger 'we' and interdependent with others, personal preferences may be sacrificed to fulfill group's goals, duties and obligations. Furthermore, cultures define counseling psychology (e.g., Savickas, 2007) or career (e.g., Savickas, 2001) in different ways, leading to calls for a culturally embedded understanding of careers (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004). By exploring the relational perspective in careers in a country outside of the US, we also seek to contribute to a wider understanding of contextual and cultural influences on work and career.

1. Conceptual development and hypotheses

Although mentoring scholars have theorized about the importance of interpersonal comfort, few empirical studies have examined such variables (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005). Nonetheless, some recent evidence suggests that relationship closeness influences relationship development (Allen et al., 2006; Flum, 2001). We adapt concepts from career theory and social network theory to examine the role of relationship closeness in dyadic developmental relationships and subsequent career success (Flum, 2001; Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Flum (2001) established the links between relational dimensions, defined as modes of human connection, and career development. Among the eight relational dimensions Flum (2001) identified attachment, defined as the process of keeping closeness to another person, to be the most important in developing close and secure relationships and leading to less loneliness and anxiety. According to Flum (2001, p. 3), "when people know that someone is there for them, the relationship becomes a resource from which they draw strength and enjoyment." Thus attachment, which is conceptually similar to relationship closeness, is an important aspect of developmental relationships at work.

In a similar vein, Granovetter (1973, p. 1361), who distinguished strong ties from weak ties, defined tie strength as: "The strength of [an interpersonal] tie combines the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services which characterize the tie." Strong ties aid in the transfer of tacit and complex knowledge and promote knowledge transfer and sharing (Uzzi, 1997). Siebert et al. (2001) found that individuals who had more strong ties also received more career assistance and access to information. We theorize that in developmental relationships, individuals will obtain more developmental assistance and support from close relationships, conceptualized as relationships with more intimacy and communication frequency.

In their model examining antecedents of developmental networks, Higgins and Kram (2001) theorized that individual differences, such as personality, influence the establishment of developmental relationships. There is considerable evidence that personality influences organization relevant outcomes such as job performance, leadership, motivation, teamwork, and career success (Ng et al., 2005). The Big Five traits shape an individual's ability to adapt to society, family life, working relationships, interpersonal relationships, and other life domains (Caligiuri, 2000). Below, we provide reasons why the Big Five personality traits influence relationship closeness.

1.1. Personality and relationship closeness

Conscientious individuals tend to strive for achievement and are dutiful, self-disciplined, hard working, and reliable (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and this trait is linked with high job performance (Judge et al., 1999). High conscientious individuals are motivated to get along with others, which contribute to better interpersonal relationships and performance outputs (Hough, 1992). Conscientious individuals also tend to be cautious about taking actions that will damage their reputations (Caligiuri, 2000). Because conscientious individuals are more responsible and hardworking, we theorize that they will be more highly liked and respected by their developers. In addition, conscientious individuals should be likely to initiate and keep in close contact with their career developers to obtain work-related assistance. Thus, we hypothesize that conscientiousness will be related positively to relationship closeness.

Hypothesis 1. Conscientiousness relates positively to (a) intimacy and (b) communication frequency.

Highly extraverted individuals tend to be warm, outgoing, positive, sociable, and with a high energy level; thus they tend to be comfortable interacting with others (Costa & McCrae, 1992). For example, Asendorpf and Wilpers (1998) found extraversion to be positively associated with the number of friends made and the time spent interacting with them. Extraverted individuals, however, can be outspoken and domineering (John, 1989), characteristics that can hurt social relationships. But we theorize that extraverted individuals may curtail these domineering tendencies with developers who are usually of higher status. Thus, on balance because highly extraverted individuals handle social situations well (Goldberg, 1999), we expect extraversion to foster close relationships with developers.

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