Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csje20

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Jenni Kantola & Seppo Penttilä

To cite this article: Jenni Kantola & Seppo Penttilä (2023): What drives mentors? The role of benevolence in mentoring motives, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2023.2229371

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2229371

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Published online: 02 Jul 2023.

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SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2229371

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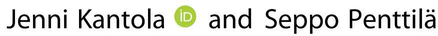

Jenni Kantola and Seppo Penttilä

School of Management, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland

ABSTRACT

Mentoring has proved to be an effective supporting practice for students in higher education in terms of building networks, a stronger professional identity and guiding their career aspirations. However, we lack a deep understanding of what attracts experienced experts to invest time and energy into guiding students. The latest studies suggest that motives to mentor are strongly prosocial. In this qualitative study, we apply the concept of benevolence, which refers to the individuals' need to sense that they are positively impacting others' lives. The approach provides a new perspective on mentors' motives by directing the focus beyond actions they interpret as benefitting others to encompass how they interpret their impact on students and possibly acquire benefits themselves. Benevolent acts should not be considered solely from the perspective of benefitting the recipient but also are intended to provide something to the giver.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 September 2022
Accepted 18 June 2023

KEYWORDS
Mentoring; mentor; motive; benevolence; self-determination theory (SDT)

Introduction

Over the last decade, ever more universities worldwide have been providing formal mentoring programmes for their students. Mentoring has been shown to be an effective supporting practice for students in terms of network creation, guiding their career aspirations, and strengthening their professional identity (Haggard et al., 2011). Mentors have been acknowledged to have a key role in creating meaningful mentorship programmes, and they have been characterized as role models, supporters, and inspirational career guides (Haggard et al., 2011; Scandura & Williams, 2001; Tolar, 2012). Especially in external mentoring, where mentoring is provided by mentors from outside academia, including university alumni or businesspeople, students are expected to receive particular support that takes account of their future careers. External mentoring provides a student with support in planning professional goals, coaching in career planning, strengthening the professional identity at work, and assisting with finding employment (Dollinger et al. 2019; Ensher & Ehrhardt, 2022). Overall, external mentoring develops professional, social, and cognitive skills (St-Jean et al., 2017).

A mentoring programme is often offered as an extra-curricular activity, and joining a programme is most likely voluntary. We know a good deal about students' incentives to volunteer for such programmes; however, we know little about what attracts experienced mentors to commit to guiding less experienced students and investing their time and energy into doing so. The motives to become a mentor have been found to relate strongly to intrinsic aspirations: a sense of compassion, self-awareness, and a willingness to empower others (Larsson et al., 2016). Mentors

CONTACT Jenni Kantola jenni.kantola@uwasa.fi

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emphasize especially others' needs and a desire to benefit others (Allen, 2003); following this, they have been characterized as having strong 'other-oriented empathy' (Allen, 2003).

Moreover, a person feeling they are beneficent is likely to enhance their sense of well-being. Studies on basic psychological needs show that well-being is mediated by the satisfaction of innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). However, studies have recognized that prosocial acts also improve well-being because they are volitional and autonomous (Martela et al., 2019) and define beneficence as 'a subjective feeling or evaluation about actor's sense of having done good things to others' (Martela & Ryan, 2016a, p. 751). While a mentor's primary motive concerns benefitting others, we aim to understand how mentors perceive they are doing good for others.

Mentoring and motivation

Universities worldwide offer mentoring programmes for their students. There is no universal format and emphasis; some have a foundation in developmental psychology, some seek to improve confidence in finding work and realizing career potential, and some focus purely on connecting students with business and industry (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Depending on the learning goal, mentoring has been applied in various ways in higher education, such as; E-mentoring (Tinoco-Giraldo et al. 2020), peer-group mentoring (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Tynjälä et al., 2021), faculty mentoring (Law et al., 2020) and alumni mentoring (Dollinger et al., 2019). Thus, the parties involved in mentoring programmes in higher education vary, including mentoring between academics and students, peer-to-peer mentoring, and mentoring provided by alumni.

Mentoring has been broadly defined as a practice where a more experienced person supports and encourages a less experienced one (Kram, 1985). Mentoring primarily develops mentees by supporting and facilitating them (Adler & Stringer, 2018) and emphasizes reflection and role modelling (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018). Mentoring has also been described as a relationship where the interaction between mentor and mentee is key to developing new insights (Wilbanks 2013; Adler & Stringer, 2018; Seow, Pan & Koh, 2019). Kram (1985) identified a mentoring relationship cycle involving four phases: initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition. That approach emphasizes the developmental and relational nature of mentoring. Mentoring has also been defined as a tool that helps build coaching relationships (Sharma et al. 2015) and provide experiential learning (Bell et al. 2016), thus being an effective educational tool to help support and guide students (Reid et al. 2020; Scerri et al., 2020). Mentoring is often characterized as a learning tool that strengthens self-knowledge and self-determination (Willbanks 2013; Darwin, 2015; Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018). The original concept of mentoring began to develop in the 1970s (St Clair, 1994), and in the traditional view, a mentor and far less experienced student learns from the mentor's experience and knowledge. Today's view on mentoring is far richer and emphasizes contemporary mentoring as "equitable learning with social transformative value" (Mullen & Klimaitis 2021).

Mentors' functions can be categorized into two broad themes: to support students' career aspirations and offer psychosocial support. The first refers to mentors' actions to enhance employability and professional development (promoting networks, visibility, and how to complete challenging assignments). In contrast, the latter refers to the means mentors employ with their mentees to support them (e.g., coaching, counselling, acceptance, and confirmation) (Haggard et al., 2011). From the communication perspective, the study shows that the actual conversations between mentors and mentees can be characterized as learning dialogues because interactions included reflections and were forward-looking and future-minded (Clutterbuck et al., 2017).

Overall, the findings on academic mentoring programmes have been positive from the point of view of student outcomes. Studies have shown that participating in a formal mentoring programme leads to higher satisfaction with their university experience and higher employability after graduation compared to students who did not participate in the programme (Crisp, Nora & Taggart

2009; Murphy & Ensher 2001). Professionally oriented mentoring increases the awareness of career options and the understanding of current working-life requirements but also supports establishing networks (Adler & Stringer, 2018; Kao et al., 2021; Murray et al., 2015). Previous studies also show that a mentoring programme can integrate alumni and industry stakeholders within the university community. Therefore, mentoring not only supports participative students and boosts their employability but also provides opportunities to market the university and deepen collaboration (Dollinger et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2015). Despite several positive outcomes, some research points to instances where mentoring has failed to deliver its full potential. If a mentor adopts a judgemental and critical mentoring style, mentoring relationship and its potential benefits are easily harmed (Hobson & Malderez, 2013). Similarly, if the matching process is not properly administered, and the mentor and mentee do not share the same interests, the participants may become detached from the process (Dollinger et al., 2019).

A mentoring relationship requires commitment and regular interaction. However, there is a shortage of research on what persuades mentors to volunteer and keeps them engaged in the demanding process. The motives to become a mentor have been found to relate strongly to intrinsic aspirations: a sense of compassion, self-awareness, and a willingness to empower others (Larsson et al., 2016). However, while we can generalize to an extent on motives, they can be quite diverse. Janssen et al. (2014) categorize mentoring motives into five broad sets that focus on the self, the mentee, the relationship, the organization, or unconscious information processing. Generally, mentoring is seen as a chance to influence another individual while boosting the mentor's enthusiasm, energy, and feeling of having a meaningful role. Being able to support and help someone in their career aspirations and self-development can offer mentors personal satisfaction and fulfilment (Allen. et al. 2008). Studies exploring in-house mentoring programmes report that mentoring can influence the mentor's working life and improve their job performance, organizational commitment, and career success (Chun et al., 2012; Ghosh & Reio Jr, 2013). The mentoring programme itself has an impact on the mentor's engagement as well. Larsson et al. (2016) recognized that mentors long for clear responsibilities, individual support, and guidance parallel to emotional connection and feelings of duty (Larsson et al., 2016). A few studies on in-house mentoring indicate that prior mentoring experience may encourage individuals to become a mentor. Some other research indicates that individuals with prior experience of providing or receiving mentoring are more optimistic about the process and have a stronger intention to join mentoring programmes (Ragins & Scandura, 1999; Wanberg et al., 2003). It has been assumed that mentors will wish to reciprocate the assistance they received when studying. Participating in mentoring programmes also serves social needs and attracts like-minded people who appreciate lifelong learning and self-development. (Darwin, 2015.) Studies on the mentee perspective within e-mentoring indicate that previous experience is likely to support interaction and understanding in mentoring relationships. Despite the lack of studies in a higher-education context, prior experience should have an impact on the intention to join a mentoring programme and influence the subsequent interaction owing to a familiarity with mentoring principles.

Mentoring, SDT, and the sense of benevolence

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci et al., 2017) is a broad theory of human motivation that has evolved over the past forty years to become one of the most utilized frameworks in many fields, including organizational studies (Sheldon et al., 2003). The SDT literature can illuminate the individual motivation to engage in activity and postulates that all human beings have three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. These together promote autonomous motivation, performance, and individual well-being (Deci et al., 2017).

Several studies exploring mentoring motives conclude that the mentoring relationship is linked to the fulfilment of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (e.g., Haggard et al., 2011; Janssen et al. 2013; Larsson et al., 2016). The literature simultaneously encourages

mentoring researchers to utilize SDT to investigate mentors' motives for engaging in a mentoring relationship. First, Janssen et al. (2013) recognized that mentees need encouragement to embark on the process (autonomy), confirmation behaviour, praise of competent behaviour (competence), and support for self-disclosure that can be interpreted as being connected to relatedness. The SDT framework also reveals both intrinsic and extrinsic motives of mentors, which include a strong need to form and maintain close relationships (Janssen et al., 2014).

Self-determination theory is known owing to the tripartite-needs concept; however, the latest discussion around the theory addresses the vital role of benevolence. In the theory development period, Martela and Ryan (2016a, 2016b, 2019) suggested beneficence as a fourth basic psychological need. Weinstein and Ryan (2010) had previously found that 'autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfactions mediated the wellness benefits derived from prosocial behaviour, with all three needs having an independent contribution' (Martela & Ryan, 2016a, p. 751). Today beneficence has been recognized as having an inherent and direct impact on enhanced feelings of wellness, even independently of the other three psychological needs (Martela & Ryan, 2016b, 2019). Feeling beneficence is understood as a 'sense of having a positive impact in the lives of other people', while prosocial acts refer to the actual performance (Martela and Ryan 2020, p. 116). From a practical point of view, it is important to understand what motivates mentors to aid in creating suitable programmes and determining the support and guidance necessary to strengthen mentoring relationships.

Methodology

We conducted ten interviews with mentors from a university mentoring programme conducted in the previous year. We approached three mentoring programme coordinators at Finnish universities, who passed the interview invitation to the mentors in their networks. Finally, ten mentors – five men and five women – accepted the invitation, and we conducted interviews via Zoom. The mentors came from different fields of business, and all held expert or manager positions and had academic degrees. Their ages varied from 27–71, and their experience of mentoring also varied. Four had no experience with mentoring programmes, while the remainder had been involved in mentoring several times or had limited experience. Three of the participants mentioned that they had no experience of formal mentoring programmes; nevertheless, they were familiar with mentoring from their work and acting as informal mentors to colleagues. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one hour and were transcribed. We asked open questions to elicit the motivation behind becoming a mentor and what makes them continue mentoring as relationships evolve. In addition, we were interested in what the respondents considered they had learned or achieved during the mentoring process and how they described their experience of the mentoring process. This study is part of a more extensive study exploring mentors' motives drawing on SDT. Interviews explored mentoring motives on a general level, and no direct or specific questions on certain kinds of motives were presented to the participants. Interviews were made in cooperation between authors one and two, who worked as research assistants and focused on data gathering. The second author conducted eight interviews alone, the first author one alone and one of the interviews conducted together. The interview, which was conducted together, was a pilot interview and a chance for the research assistant, a novice interviewer, to follow the interaction in the interview and learn by example. One of the interviews was conducted solely by the first author because the second author and participant had had a mentoring relationship, and this was a solution to facilitate discussions in confidence. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Both authors were involved in designing the research and data gathering, and the data analysis and discussed the findings to ensure qualitative credibility and to expand their understanding of the data. In our research, we followed the basic principles of the Research Ethics Advisory Board (TENK 2019), namely reliability, honesty, respect, and responsibility. Additionally, we broadly adhered to good scientific practices (TENK 2023), such as conducting truthful and careful scientific work,

honest communication, and proper handling and management of research data. Furthermore, we followed the ethical principle of informed consent (TENK 2019).

This original data was analysed using theory-driven content analysis, exploring four (autonomy, capability, relatedness, benevolence) dimensions drawn from SDT. The notion that the dimension of benevolence played a key role in the data led us to scrutinize that dimension more carefully. In this study, we only use excerpts of larger data that represented the dimension of benevolence. Discourse analysis provides an appropriate lens to understand the role and characteristics of benevolent acts by focusing on how participants/mentors represent their behaviour and experiences. Our study leans on the premise that social reality is discursively constructed and maintained and that individuals shape social reality through language (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Accordingly, this approach allows us to study the mentor's views and perceptions of the relationship with the mentee through language.

Discourses extend our understanding of how individuals position themselves and how they align their actions. Researchers are 'in the role of "glorified reporters" whose main role is to give an adequate account of the informants' experience. We do not presume to impose prior constructs or theories on the informants as some sort of preferred a priori explanation for understanding or explaining their experience' (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 17).

When interpreting data, we applied Gioia et al.'s (2013) method, which offers a systematic approach to produce an analysis with qualitative rigour. This method of analysis proceeds through three steps. First, we read the benevolence-related notions and created categories from the raw data. The number of categories was overwhelming at that point as we did not attempt to combine them and retained the original terms and quotes the informants had used. After the second stage, we began to identify similarities and differences among the categories and finally gave those categories new labels. Several examples of helping others, the meaningfulness of the process to themselves, doubt concerning their role, challenges, and discussion around values emerged. After several rounds of reading, we recognized that participants perceived their benevolent mentoring experiences from two angles; they described several different forms of benevolence alongside how they made sense of doing good. *An act of benevolence* refers to the role individuals describe when taking benevolent actions, and *a sense of benevolence* refers to signals that make a mentor feel benevolent. The first thus describes the actual behaviour and role and the other mentors' sense-making of a benevolent act. These findings provide us with an understanding of the actions followed by the need for benevolence in mentoring motives.

The findings are presented below in a format revealing the analysis levels; however, instead of listing an overwhelming number of first-order categories here in the paper, we have chosen to summarize second-order themes and present some original quotes from our data next in Tables 1 and 2.

Analysis and findings

We interviewed ten mentors to discern their motivation for acting as a mentor in a university's formal mentoring programme. We found that mentors speak about benevolent acts from two perspectives. First, what mentors consider as a way of doing good, and two, how they sense they have done some good. Tables 1 and 2 below summarize the data analysis and coding and present interview excerpts that exemplify key points. The first table (below) presents four sub-discourses that describe the approach mentors talked about in the context of doing benevolent acts. We named those sub-discourses: *enabler, coach, empoweree and awakener.* The sub-discourses represent the ideal situation that would maximize the mentee's benefit. The analysis shows that mentors approach mentorship in a goal-oriented manner and believe they have assets that can benefit others, in this case, their mentees. The discourses also indicate a strong will to help the mentees achieve changes, as evidenced by using verbs like help, support, and provide. The approaches adopted by the mentors range from the practical to the more mentality oriented, and the discourses suggest the latter is dominant. Generally, a mentor's behaviour is categorized as either career-oriented or fulfilling

Table 1. Act of benevolence during the mentoring process.

Act of Benevolence	*Summary Of Themes*	*Quotations*
ENABLER	The mentor aims to support the student's career steps in practice (i.e., introductions to networks)	*'I would like to help them in the transition to working life. I have lots of contacts, so I could provide them with opportunities'. (6)* *'I knew that everyone does not have family or friends that can provide the necessary network and contacts … without [contacts] the transition to working life will not necessarily be easy' (7)*
COACH	The mentor aims to support the student in developing stronger working-life competencies. It can be practically oriented (technical issues, such as compiling a CV or applications or designing one's curriculum) or more mentality oriented (e.g., preparing students to face future working life expectations and ease the transition to working life)	*'I want to guide her in tactics in the application process … and help her to stand out' (1)* *'I'd be pleased if I could help someone to avoid the challenges I have faced.' (3)* *'My view is that I could support the student's personal development and see a change in thinking.' (4)* *'I have been especially good at guiding to choose minor subjects that support future career and helping to reflect future career expectations.'(10)*
EMPOWEREE	The mentor aims to empower and encourage the student to attain their dreams.	*'I think that my task is to help them to attain their dreams' (6)*
AWAKENER	The mentor aims to help the student understand the realities and different approaches to working life.	*'Students need real-life examples … things don't always go the way you expect.'(1)* *' I want to shake people and challenge them to think about what is their professional value … and help them to define it.' (8)* *'Mentoring is about widening student's perspective on working life.' (10)*

Table 2. Sense of benevolence during the mentoring process

Sense of Benevolence	*Summary Of Themes*	*Quotations*
GRATITUDE	Direct and verbal positive feedback, words of gratitude	'It's great when you hear words or receive whatever feedback. That others find [mentoring] beneficent.' (5)
SIGNS OF TRUST	Symbolic feedback on the success of benefitting the mentee, signs of trust and mutual understanding, signs of self-development (e.g., self-confidence)	' … I have seen how she has gained self-confidence.' (6) ' … I feel that I'm doing meaningful work when I am able to help someone younger.' (3) ' … it was great to get to know [the mentee] and encourage their thinking and even challenge their traditional thoughts.' (2)
COMPANIONSHIP	Sharing successes throughout the process (e.g., new employment opportunities)	' … when you see the excitement and joy … you feel that you have been part of that success.' (3) ' … this young woman was brave enough to contact this potential employer and even got the place … We were both happy.' (6)
MISMATCH	Feeling disappointed at not being able to help or support the mentee, doubting own capabilities, worrying about the mentee.	' … but we discussed at the beginning of the process that a mentor is not a therapist … I have recommended therapy to quite a few mentees.' (6) ' … sometimes I feel that I'm not a psychologist … and how can I cheer up these individuals.' (9) 'Somehow mentoring just did not take off … I wonder whether it was an age-related thing … that she was too shy to contact … Maybe I should have been more proactive.' (10) 'I feel pressured if I feel that our thoughts do not align or if it does not work between us; I have thought a lot about the disappointment caused by mentorship.'(8)

psychosocial functions (Haggard et al., 2011). In the current context, it is understandable that psychosocial functions dominate the relationship because the mentors were not acting on behalf of employers or to support their peers, as would be the case in in-house mentoring. However, they are building a mentoring relationship in which the student's developmental needs are the sole focus.

The reasoning behind the sub-discourse labels is as follows: *Enabler* refers, for example, to narratives where mentors describe themselves as a provider and supporter who can create more opportunities or networks for students; whereas the *coach* would be a mentor who works through building new capabilities and skills. This discourse addressed handling the career and future work of the student mentee from a practical point of view, and mentoring was seen as a good way of passing on information and experience. The *empoweree* and *awakener* sub-discourses highlight the role of mental growth and self-development. The difference is that whereas the empoweree discourse emphasizes encouragement and a positive and inspirational approach, the awakener approaches the mentoring process from the perspective of enlightenment, as a chance to provide critical views and prepare students by alerting them to realities not necessarily visible to them given their limited work experience.

The second table (Table 2) illustrates how mentors describe their sense of benevolence during the mentoring process. We identified four sub-discourses under the sense of benevolence: *gratitude, signs of trust, companionship, and mismatch.* These sub-discourses describe signals mentors elicit from their interactions and interpret in parallel with doing good. These signs provide them with an understanding of how interaction is affecting and thus also guide mentors' future interaction. Compared to the first main discourse that includes the description of mentors' actions and role as aiming to do some good and provides insights into mentors' interpretations of their actions benefitting others, the second main discourse is thus based on the evaluation of having attained the goals the mentors set for the relationship. Three of the sub-discourses are positive and have an uplifting effect on mentors and convey their feeling of having been successful. However, the fourth sub-discourse illustrates the challenging part of the mentoring process and increases hesitation over managing and succeeding in the mentoring process.

Gratitude is the label applied to the category of narratives where the mentors discuss receiving direct feedback on their efforts as a mentor. Thanking a mentor was seen as a way of expressing that the mentor's actions and support were valuable for the mentee.

The second sub-discourse, signs of trust, refers to narratives characterizing symbolic feedback, signifying that the relationship has evolved to a level where the mentee trusts the mentor. That trust would be exhibited in exchanges opening up and conversations flowing. At that point, mentors would assess that they can connect with the student mentee. The mentoring relationship is an ongoing development process, and the mentor and mentee feeling that they get along will support the total interaction and the possible outcomes (Haggard et al. 2011).

The companionship sub-discourse highlights specific shared moments in the process, especially those connected with preliminary goals. For example, obtaining a job interview, finding a job, or moments when the mentor notes that the mentee has developed as a person, for example, through acquiring self-confidence. The mentor does not directly influence such turning points, but as the mentor and mentee relationship develops, the mentor can derive a sense of satisfaction from the mentee's development steps. The fact that mentees want to share the positive aspects of their life with their mentor also signifies trust.

The fourth sub-discourse, then, is different in the sense that it brings out the opposite experience. Doing good also showed how the mentoring process and relationship during that can be unpredictable. The findings revealed the impact of a failure to do good to the extent anticipated. Mentors spoke of experiences characterized here as mismatches and failing to make an impact that led to feelings of misunderstanding, disappointment, worry, or incapability.

The set of sub-discourses highlights the strong goal orientation inherent in a formal mentoring programme involving a student and an external mentor. The orientation is particularly apparent when the first steps are aligned with the goals set by the university. The mentors' narratives revealed

that even if a university mentoring programme aims to impart information on working life and career options to students, the mentoring relationship is likely to emphasize mental support and self-growth.

Discussion

This study addresses mentoring in the context of a higher-education mentoring programme seeking to provide students with the opportunity to learn from external experts. Mentoring has been shown to provide multiple opportunities to students in the form of career guidance and professional and personal development; however, discussion of mentors' motives and the benefits to them is scarce.

We began with the notion that mentors' decisions to commit to a mentor relationship are motivated by a desire to benefit and empower others (e.g., Allen, 2003; Larsson et al., 2016). Encouraged by the previous findings that mentoring motives are linked to the fulfilment of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (e.g., Haggard et al., 2011; Janssen et al. 2013; Larsson et al., 2016), we applied SDT, concentrating on the latest iteration of the theory incorporating the dimension of benevolence (Martela et al., 2019). Benevolence is interpreted here as a sense of having an impact on others, an interpretation in line with previous findings that show the importance of prosocial behaviour to mentors (Allen, 2003). This study focuses on mentors in formal university mentoring programmes and recognizes that mentors speak about benevolent acts from two perspectives. First, what mentors consider to be a way of doing good and second, how they sense they have done some good. Accordingly, the concept of benevolence provides a new perspective on mentors' motives by directing the focus beyond those actions they feel benefit others to encompass how they interpret their impact on students and possibly acquire benefits themselves. In this study, mentors presented their benevolent acts in four ways. They perceived their role as enablers, coaches, empowerees, and as awakeners. Actions were characterized as positive and activating, and mentors perceived they had the ability and human capital to offer students their wisdom on personal and professional development issues. Mentors particularly emphasized their role in supporting students' mental-oriented growth when referring to doing good. Although the higher-education context emphasizes the career-oriented and employment-supportive functions at the core of mentoring programmes, psychosocial support dominates mentorships in that context (Haggard et al., 2011). Given that university mentoring programmes usually target students in their final years of study, and together with the challenges of finding employment, building a career identity and puzzling with different areas in life, the need for encouragement and mental support is probably very important for students at that stage of life.

Another notion around mentor roles (enablers, coaches, empowerees, awakeners) was that they are supportive and encouraging rather than solely acting as providers of knowledge, as in traditional approaches to mentorship. This finding aligns with others describing mentoring as a two-way relationship with mutual benefit. The mentee receives guidance, support, and learning experiences, and the mentor benefits too (Darwin, 2015; Stefaniak & Dmoch-Gajzlerska, 2020). At its best, mentoring can enhance mentors' self-development and awareness (Hudson, 2013). The findings indicate that mentoring has moved from a traditional one-way flow of information to become more relational (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006), with emphasis on collaborative learning and dialogue with others (Trevethan & Sandretto, 2017) toward mutual professional development (Kemmis et al., 2014). Formal mentoring programme development should consider this shift and design and support participants to see the benefits of co-mentoring and encourage participants into openness and dialogue where both can gain new insights and learn from each other.

Although mentors described their strong inclination to do good and support students in their development process, they also wanted to see results and understand whether their actions were successful and adequate. Mentors absorb multiple signals during their mentorship, whether direct messages in the form of expressions of gratitude or more symbolic signs of trust or important milestones in students' lives. The finding shows how important it is to succeed in doing good and be

accepted. However, data also unveils the paradox of benevolence, that a willingness to benefit others does not always generate feelings of benevolence; there is a risk that a mentoring relationship may not be as fruitful as assumed or intended. Moreover, actions intended to do good will not always have the impact mentors would like. The mismatch sub-discourse brought up negative signals and sub-optimal outcomes of benevolent acts. Negative experiences of mentoring are not rare (Eby et al., 2000) and can be anticipated if mentors and mentees have different attitudes, values, and beliefs (Ragins 1997). One crucial factor is ensuring a good match between mentor and mentee and providing opportunities for mentor and mentee to interact before committing to mentorship (Eby et al., 2000).

Overall, these findings illuminate active relationships where both parties jointly create outcomes. Mentoring should not be considered only as giving but also as an act intended to provide something to the giver. Those organizing mentoring programmes should also consider that mentors seek to make a meaningful contribution and want to feel they have worth. Accordingly, mentors should be trained to face problematic situations and given the tools to handle dysfunctional interactions.

In addition, this study contributes to mentoring literature by applying SDT in a higher-education mentoring context. Self-determination has been applied in several mentoring contexts, such as faculty mentoring (Lechuga, 2014), informal mentoring (Janssen et al., 2014; Roobol & Koster, 2020), school-to-work peer mentoring (Fisher et al., 2020), but not in the context of formal mentoring in a higher-education setting. The notion behind the SDT is that motives are driven by individual needs, and understanding what kind of need lay under the behaviour and experiences of mentors is important to understand. Since Janssen et al. (2016) noted that the application of SDT in mentoring research is still in its infancy, SDT has grown in popularity; however, the theory still offers several interesting directions. One strength of this study is that it provides an understanding of the concept of benevolence. Prior studies have not considered the ongoing discussion around benevolence as a possible fourth dimension in SDT (Martela et al., 2019). The benevolence dimension, interpreted according to self-determination theorists as a sense of benevolence, provides insights into both forms of action and feedback on benevolent actions in terms of how mentors receive and interpret that feedback. We would encourage scholars in the field of mentoring to further investigate the role of a sense of benevolence in mentoring motives at different stages of the mentoring process and in different contexts.

We acknowledge certain limitations of our study, mainly due to the nature of our sample. First, this is a qualitative study emphasizing analytic generalization. Accordingly, the most important goal is the comparison of empirical data and established theory (Yin 2002). We have also stressed the conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that explains the relationship between data and interpretations. We have ensured others can understand the development of the analysis herein by presenting the stages of analysis pursued in tables and using interview excerpts to explicate our reading of the data. However, our findings are based on a small number of mentors (n. 10), and our study concentrates only on mentors involved in formal mentoring programmes run by universities. Thus, further studies with larger data and possibly with a focus on one specific mentoring programme would be able to elicit meanings of mentor-student matching and guidance provided to mentors.

Second, our study participants had volunteered to participate in mentoring programmes and to contribute to the study, which opens the possibility of social desirability bias. Bergen and Labonté (2020) refer to social desirability bias as ‘a tendency to present reality to align with what is perceived to be socially acceptable. Perhaps only people who were satisfied with the mentoring they were party to wanted to share their experiences of it, and consequently that those who had more negative experiences of mentoring declined to participate. If we had concentrated solely on all the participants in one programme, we might have mitigated the risk, but we feel our study benefited from harvesting the views of mentors from three different university mentoring programmes. We look forward to studies conducted with the same approach but in different contexts that could extend the understanding of this topic.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Jenni Kantola http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6843-1689

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