

A Commentary on Dhaenens et al. (2025): Understanding Mentoring Giving From a Generalized Exchange Perspective

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In this commentary on [Dhaenens et al. \(2025\)](#), we aim to expand the discussion on mentoring in contemporary workplaces by introducing an alternative theoretical perspective, namely, generalized exchange. While

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Dhaenens et al. (2025) rightly point to the limitations of using a reciprocal exchange perspective to understand mentoring giving in organizations, they overlook the role of generalized exchange in driving mentoring giving. This oversight prevents them from identifying potential motivations for mentoring giving based on collective reciprocity, alternative explanations for why mentoring giving can enhance centrality in developmental networks, and the potential benefits to the organization. Below, we first introduce the concept of generalized exchange and then elaborate on how this perspective helps extend research on mentoring giving.

Generalized exchange is a collective form of social exchange involving three or more participants (Flynn, 2005). In this form of exchange, individuals who provide resources to others do not receive direct reciprocation from the recipients; instead, they receive resources from someone else in the group. Hence, in this form, reciprocation occurs indirectly without prior agreements among participants. As Blau (1964) observed, long chains of social interactions occur in complex organizations, where the work of some members contributes to that of others, and these typically do not involve direct reciprocation. The underlying mechanism of this exchange is collective reciprocity, where individuals balance what they receive from other members in the group with what they provide to other members (Yoshikawa et al., 2020), instead of direct reciprocity, where individuals balance what they receive from and give to each counterpart.

This collective reciprocity manifests in three distinct forms of behavior, including paying it forward, rewarding reputation (Baker & Bulkley, 2014), and the unilateral giving of resources with the expectation of indirect reciprocation (Yamagishi et al., 1999). Paying it forward refers to a person receiving resources from another person and then giving resources to a third person. Rewarding reputation refers to a person giving resources to another, and then a third person, observing this act, transfers resources to the original giver. Unilateral giving refers to one member providing resources to another in a group, with the expectation that someone in the group will reciprocate at some point in the future. Altogether, generalized exchange offers advantages in facilitating flexible resource exchange compared to reciprocal exchange, because reciprocal exchange requires the formation of high-quality relationships and is therefore limited to close, well-established relationships (Levine & Prietula, 2012). Furthermore, participation in generalized exchange promotes trust, identification, and a sense of solidarity among group members (Willer et al., 2012). With these positive impacts, generalized exchange is considered a critical ingredient of organizational social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002), which has been used to explain organizational citizenship behaviors (Yoshikawa et al., 2020), knowledge sharing (Yoshikawa et al.,

2023), and language advice to colleagues in a highly diverse workplace (Al-Naemi et al., 2025).

Following the generalized exchange perspective, we can extend Dhaenens et al.'s (2025) work by identifying motivations behind mentoring giving. First, one may conduct mentoring because they have received mentoring (or other types of support) from another individual, following the rule of paying it forward. Second, one may provide mentoring to those who support others in the organization, following the logic of rewarding reputation. Third, a person may unilaterally offer mentoring to other individuals, expecting that such behaviors may lead to receiving resources (e.g., social support) from someone in the organization. In other words, individuals with a strong belief in following the rules of collective reciprocity in organizations (i.e., generalized exchange orientation) (Yoshikawa et al., 2020) are more likely to engage in mentoring giving within the organization.

The generalized exchange perspective also offers an alternative explanation for why mentoring enhances the mentor's centrality within intra-organizational developmental networks. When someone frequently provides mentoring to junior colleagues, their efforts are likely to be recognized not only by the recipients of the mentoring but also by others within the organization. This perception then motivates these observers to provide support, including mentoring, to the focal person, following collective reciprocity (or more specifically, rewarding reputation). Receiving such support will further motivate the focal person to provide mentoring (and other forms of support) to other members as a pay-it-forward behavior. Such a virtuous cycle results in the focal person enhancing the target of their mentoring giving and becoming the target of mentoring from a broader range of individuals within the organization, thereby increasing their centrality in the developmental networks of the organization. Indeed, while Dhaenens et al. (2025) refer to the role of "recognition as a mentoring source" (p. 8), the perspective of generalized exchange provides a theoretical explanation for why such recognition may lead to centrality in developmental networks. Future studies can examine whether, how and when continued efforts to provide mentoring can lead to the formation of such recognition of the focal individual, and whether such recognitions improve the focal individual's centrality as a recipient of mentoring (and other social support) within the organization.

Finally, the generalized exchange perspective also highlights the potential benefits of mentoring giving to organizations, shifting the focus beyond the advantages for mentoring givers. Being part of a generalized exchange of mentoring may foster employees' trust, identification, and a sense of solidarity with other members of the organization. As modern organizations experience shorter employee tenure and increasingly "use term-based structures and

hybrid and flexible work arrangements” (Dhaenens et al., 2025, p. 2), it becomes harder to nurture positive relationships among employees for effective collaboration. Creating a chain of mentorship within an organization through generalized exchange may help address these challenges while fostering a collaborative and collectivist organizational climate at the organizational level. Therefore, we emphasize an additional opportunity to broaden the scope of literature by examining the organizational-level benefits of promoting mentoring in contemporary organizations.

To summarize, the perspective of generalized exchange offers another angle for understanding mentoring in modern organizations. We hope that our commentary will stimulate further research into this important phenomenon.

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