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# **Everybody's Looking for Something: Developmental Networks as Subjective Career Relationships**

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Career development is deeply shaped by relationships with specific people who take active roles in key aspects of a focal actor's career (Dobrow et al., 2012; Higgins et al., 2010). Termed "developmental networks", these relationships are often studied from a functionalist approach, where relationships serve specific functions and the role of research is to inventory these functions (Janssen et al., 2013) and empirically test their impact on career outcomes (Cheung et al., 2016; Cotton et al., 2011). From this approach, developmental networks have been found to contribute to career outcomes by providing various resources (e.g., Barthauer, Spurk & Kauffeld, 2016; Dobrow et al, 2012; Higgins, Dobrow & Chandler, 2008; Janssen, Van Vuuren & De Jong, 2013), from purely instrumental (e.g., sponsorship in promotion committees, advice on career strategizing) to those touching more upon personal growth (e.g., learning, psychosocial support, socialization). Although such approaches contribute substantially to explaining career outcomes, they do not account for the idiosyncrasies of how people represent and make sense of their developmental relationships and subjectively link them to wider career development. By assigning objective functions to developmental networks, such approaches build on an assumption that people identically experience relationships as means serving well-defined goals (Kuwabara et al., 2018).

A recent stream of studies questions this view of network agency as a goal-oriented approach to building relational portfolios that target specific career objectives (Engel et al., 2017). For instance, studies of entrepreneurs suggest the mutual influence of relationships and entrepreneurial goals, rather than an exclusively goal-oriented approach (Pret et al., 2016). Other studies show how leveraging relationships for personal benefit can be subjectively distasteful and depends on personal considerations (Casciaro et al., 2014). Altogether, these developments point to people's subjectivity as an emerging research area in the study of developmental networks.

In the current study, we ask the research question, “How do individuals understand their developmental networks so as to shape their career-related relationships”? By focusing on people’s subjective conceptualizations of developmental networks, we highlight the agentic aspects of individuals as they build and maintain career-related relationships, thus contributing to the broader goal of understanding how people act on their careers (Tams & Arthur, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. While “knowing-whom” has been acknowledged as an important dimension of career agency (Guan et al., 2019), its treatment has taken contradictory paths. Researchers have considered developmental networks as exogenous drivers of career achievements (Higgins, 2001) or, conversely, as agentic spaces in which people construct their own career paths (Porter et al., 2016).

Taking an interpretive approach, we suggest a third, more nuanced view: that individuals vary in how they view their networks as actionable levers or as background conditions and in their interpretations of developmental networks as opportunities or constraints. This heterogeneity shapes how and to what extent they integrate their relationships within broader objectives, based on subjective evaluations of how developmental networks relate to career outcomes. Ultimately, this interpretive view contributes to recent efforts to conceptualize careers as a personal and social construct (Afiouni & Karam, 2014).

By bracketing a priori assumptions about objective networks and focusing on how people make sense (Sandberg, 2000) of their developmental relationships, we contribute to an emerging line of theorizing around network relationships more broadly. Recent theoretical work around “effectual” approaches to relationship development, where goals remain flexible

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<sup>1</sup> Although practices might also influence understanding, and mutual influence might occur, our research interest in people’s agentic strategies leads us to focus on how people seek to relate, according to their understandings.

and non-instrumental in nature (e.g., Engel et al., 2017; Kerr & Coviello, 2019), remains lacking an empirical basis, particularly exploratory and qualitative approaches (Galkina & Atkova, 2020). Our focus on the heterogeneity of understandings allows us to consider the different forms of personal and social motivations including, but not limited to, instrumental goals. Moreover, our focus on emic perspectives and heterogeneity suggests an inductive and qualitative empirical design, an approach to networks that is still underdeveloped (e.g., Bensaou et al., 2014; Vissa, 2012) and has been the object of recent calls for increased exploration (Janssen et al., 2016).

### **Developmental Networks**

Developmental networks refer to the “constellation” of people involved in and taking action toward supporting a person’s career (Dobrow et al., 2012). From the earliest studies (e.g., Dobrow & Higgins, 2005; Higgins & Kram, 2001), developmental networks have been identified from the point of view of the focal actor; in this sense, the subjective nature of these networks has always been tacitly acknowledged. Thus, it is surprising that the different subjective conceptions of what such networks mean remain understudied. We argue that examining how individuals understand and attribute meaning to developmental networks is crucial to understanding the type of actions they take (or do not take).

We complement functionalist approaches to developmental networks (Cotton et al., 2011) that focus on objectively verifiable paths between network properties and career achievements. To identify how developmental networks matter for careers, such approaches rely on subjective evaluations to inventory the outcomes of developmental networks (e.g., Higgins et al., 2010) but without theorizing the diversity of interpretations of relationships. By contrast, we focus on subjective understandings as sources of meaning and motors of career development in their own right.

*Developmental Networks as a Unique Way of Studying Relationships*

It is widely accepted that relationships matter for career achievement (Ng et al., 2005); however, the multiplicity of constructs used to capture this phenomenon can be confusing (Dobrow et al., 2012). An important research stream beginning with mentoring eventually enlarged its scope to the broader notion of developmental networks (Cheung et al., 2016; Cotton et al., 2011; Dobrow et al., 2012; Dunn, 2019; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Janssen et al., 2013; Molloy, 2005; Yip & Kram, 2017), which, elaborating on the preceding definition, can be defined as the set of “co-workers, friends, family, and others who contribute to developing one’s career” (Cummings & Higgins, 2006: 39). Although derived from mentoring literature (Higgins & Kram, 2001), developmental networks are broader in scope than mentoring relationships. Mentoring relationships generally take a dyadic focus within a professional environment and are marked by asymmetries in rank.

Developmental relationships, by contrast, can involve people outside an organization, from different social spheres and professional domains. These can be peers or even subordinates, family, or members of the community in which a focal actor is embedded in nonprofessional life (Dobrow et al., 2012). Because the developmental network consists of the specific relationships that contribute to people’s careers, it can be viewed as a subset of their personal network (Dobrow et al., 2012; Murphy & Kram, 2010). The personal network is a concept far broader in scope, because it includes all of the focal actor’s relationships, while developmental networks involve interest and action toward supporting career development. As a network, these developmental relationships together constitute a portfolio, with a variety of resources, abilities, and ultimately contributions to the focal actor's career.

Developmental networks involve different kinds of career support; thus, understanding the value of developmental relationships involves considering their multiplicity and variety

(Chandler et al., 2010; Cotton et al., 2011). Notably, using the word “network” does evoke a connection between developmental networks and a broader network literature (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Jack, 2010). However, these are distinct traditions (Dobrow et al., 2012), in that the latter studies the global arrangement of interconnections embedding actors, with a significant emphasis placed on indirect ties. By contrast, developmental networks, on the other hand, take the actor’s point of view and examine direct relationships, generally avoiding the structural-analytic techniques common in network literature (Jack, 2010). Noting that emphasis, it is somewhat surprising that little qualitative or emic research has emerged in the developmental network tradition, even though such approaches seem tailor-made for an actor-focus.

Researchers have typically described developmental networks from one of two angles: their functions or content, or their configuration (also referred to as “structural characteristics”, Dobrow et al., 2012). Regarding the former, research has focused on the network-specific resources (i.e., career-related and psychosocial resources and their subfunctions) and their implications for career success (Higgins et al., 2010). Some treatments catalog as many as 26 subfunctions (Cotton et al., 2011), including sponsorships for career-related opportunities and advice relationships, well-being at work, encouragement, and coping resources. Such taxonomizing approaches consider relationships by the types of effects brought about, building a functionalist logic into the structure of relational theorizing itself by defining the construct in terms of its outcomes.

Regarding structure or configuration, research tends to be more indirectly instrumental in focus, involving how developmental networks array around focal actors, including the characteristics of the actor and contacts. Developmental relationships derive value from contacts’ status, for instance, if they hold decision-making positions or can leverage resources

to contribute to a protégé's career (Gentry & Sosik, 2010). Heterogeneity or range of relationships also constitute important configurational features (Higgins, 2001), for example, representation across multiple business units (Shipilov et al., 2014) or industries (Brown & Konrad, 2001) that provide access to opportunities and ideas to facilitate career strategizing (Chandler et al., 2010). Finally, configurational approaches analyze relational strength, which affects trust, mutual awareness, and motives to provide help, for instance through job referrals (Cheung & Gui, 2006). For example, weak ties may prompt connections to distant others, including higher-ranking colleagues, while strong ties often involve shared professional characteristics (Lin, 2002), with implications for career opportunities and strategies.

#### *Questioning the Instrumentalism and the Homogeneity of Developmental Networks*

Although functional and structural approaches to developmental networks differ in the directness with which relationships affect career outcomes, both share an instrumentalist tendency by which actors are endowed with a means–ends rationality (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Such approaches assume that individuals assign clear and self-serving ends to their developmental relationships, and that they know the right means to those ends.

The focus on instrumental relationships, among other consequences, has had the side effect of making it difficult to distinguish developmental networks from networking behavior, which also affects perceived career success, promotions, compensation, and other career outcomes (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009; Wolff & Spurk, 2019). Several authors have argued that the two constructs are distinct and must be studied separately (e.g., Dobrow et al., 2012; Porter et al., 2016), because while networking behavior refers to actions meant to establish career-enhancing relationships, developmental networks refer to the relationships themselves. Yet, as long as developmental relationships are examined only in terms of their instrumental outcomes, this distinction becomes difficult to maintain, and some have already noted this



overlap (e.g. Shipilov et al, 2014). In this line, it has been noted that networking is relatively heterogeneous in form (Wolff & Spurk, 2019), in terms of aims, temporal maintenance of contacts, and level of formality of contacts (Shipilov et al., 2014; Wolff & Moser, 2009). In short, networking literature does reveal the insight that relationships are likely to be handed in diverse ways by individuals.

Yet, given the instrumental focus in discussions of networking behaviors (e.g., Engel et al., 2017), we posit even greater heterogeneity in developmental networks, which crosscut work and nonwork relationships (Murphy & Kram, 2010) and where individuals draw on long-standing personal ties for advice and support. This heterogeneity further distinguishes developmental networks from networking behavior, since the relationships do not necessarily arise from intentional networking behavior, and the instrumental aspect is only part of their broader role in careers. The peculiarities of developmental networks' affective, cognitive, and motivational processes demand that researchers move beyond the instrumentality assumption.

Social behaviors may not be purely purposive or conducted to pursue maximal personal benefits (Tasselli et al., 2015). People differ in their attitudes, beliefs, and values, and some reject building or mobilizing relationships for career purposes (Bensaou et al., 2014; Casciaro et al., 2014). In addition, leveraging relationships for resources depends on motivational factors such as goal orientation (Farh et al., 2010), whereas relationship initiation can be driven by broader motivations such as a need for connectedness, belonging, or affiliation, regardless of expected instrumental benefits (Janssen et al., 2016; Shea & Fitzsimons, 2016).

Furthermore, even instrumentally motivated individuals do not universally possess the know-how or capabilities to attain relational compositions that would best benefit them. Because relational beliefs are, in part, cognitive and affective (Porter & Woo, 2015), actors'

evaluations of relationships, and their implications for behavior tend to be biased (Tasselli et al., 2015). As a result, preferences for relationship type and estimates of career-related consequences are shaped by experiences (Janicik & Larrick, 2005) and rooted in personal interpretations (Bensaou et al., 2014). In short, developmental relationships are likely to be more heterogeneous than has been previously acknowledged and are likely to combine complex mixtures of instrumental and noninstrumental motivations, as well as idiosyncratic beliefs and attributions about the purposes of relationships.

Thus, moving beyond means-ends approaches to career agency requires a view in which relational practices are more heterogeneous than those involving defined ends or specific career-outcome motives. To unveil this heterogeneity and describe conceptions of developmental networks requires qualitative approaches that focus on people's lived experiences. Yet such approaches have been rare in the field. As of Dobrow et al.'s (2012) review of extant literature, only one wholly qualitative study on the topic had appeared in a top-tier management journal (Cotton et al., 2011), while some work had appeared in conferences (Shen, 2010), or in non-management fields such as education (Schweitzer, 2009). Subsequent literature using qualitative methods in developmental networks continues to be rare (e.g., Janssen et al., 2013). Janssen et al. (2013), for instance, show how protégés classified support relationships according to needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In a later review, Janssen et al. (2016) stress the need for qualitative work to examine how individuals understand relational functions. We respond to that call by qualitatively examining subjective understandings of developmental networks.

## **Method**

### *Research Context*

To explore how employees conceptualize developmental networks as part of their career-related understandings, we surveyed employees from professional service firms (PSFs), particularly consultancy firms. We chose this setting on the basis of the principle that articulating concepts at early theorizing stages should involve settings in which the phenomenon is particularly salient (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and developmental networks are salient in consultancy settings for several reasons. First, consultancy work demands intense interactions with diverse types of people and a strong reliance on and maintenance of relationships. The need to relate to and work across diverse relational contexts (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003) provides consultants with a wide array of potential developmental relationship experiences. The loosely structured nature of PSFs, which usually staff projects through informal interactions and interpersonal recommendations (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008), suggests the importance of informal networks. Second, consultancies house multiple career possibilities, and employees rotate through them according to their aspirations and opportunities (McKenna, 2006). For example, younger recruits often covet consultant roles as a transitory step in a larger career plan. They strive to build expertise while exploring opportunities through multiple projects prior to "settling" into a large non-PSF. Moreover, consistent with the "up or out" logic of career models (Malhotra & Morris, 2009), employees do not expect to last long at a given level. Consultants have to question their intentions and possibilities and balance competing options (e.g., upward promotion vs. leaving), so they often rely on relationships for support (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). Some strive to reach partner level, but others reject the implied change in job content (i.e., from executing projects to finding new business) or the intense work–life balance challenges (Gustafsson et al., 2018).

This variety of motives was present in our sample. We retrieved the profiles of our interviewees from LinkedIn four years after our interviews and found that 16 participants had

left the consultancy world, 8 had remained in consultancy but changed companies, and 10 were with the same consulting company.

### *Research Design and Data Collection*

We conducted 34 in-depth, semistructured interviews with consultants from different firms in various fields of expertise (e.g., strategy, organization, lean management, information systems). We found participants via the alumni directory of two French business schools and contacts provided by the senior managers of Apec, a nonprofit organization that runs a large job search website in France. We interviewed people who had at least two years of professional work experience in a PSF and were part of the eight largest consulting firms in France, which account for most of France's consulting task force. Our sample includes 13 women and 21 men (25–60 years of age), all of whom were French nationals. In the sample, 41% were senior consultants, 26.5% were managers, 23.5% were senior managers, and 9% were partners. We specify further sample details in Table 1.

-----Table 1 about here-----

The individual interviews lasted 50–85 minutes and were conducted by two of the authors. We applied the same semi-structured guide in all interviews. First, we asked participants to provide an open-ended, retrospective account of their educational background and career and the key stages of their professional evolution. Second, in our effort to learn how people understand their developmental networks, we asked participants specifically about them, staying close to Higgins and Kram's definition of developmental networks as including people who "a protégé names as taking an active interest in and action to advance the protégé's career" (Higgins & Kram, 2001: 268). However, due to our desire to keep the concept broad and informant-driven, we used the more general term "development" rather

than “advancement.” We asked participants to think about people who contributed to developing their careers, both overall and at specific stages in their development. When the participants mentioned general examples (e.g., “friends”), we systematically asked for specific examples.

Third, we asked the participants to describe what they considered “having a good network”<sup>2</sup> from a professional evolution perspective. This question enabled us to understand both whom they saw as part of their network and how they subjectively evaluated networks more broadly. Of note, we did not specify any particular social sphere (e.g., work, friends, family) but left it open to the respondents’ interpretation. Inviting the participant to enter a higher level of generalization enabled us to identify possible contradictions with earlier narratives, which we could follow up with for precision and to generate reflection. Furthermore, we asked participants what actions, if any, they took to manage developmental relationships, again asking for specific examples. Finally, we asked about career plans and expectations in the short and long term. This semistructured interview procedure enabled interviewees to develop their thoughts on their relationships and inductively build concepts “emically” (Bansal et al., 2018). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### *Analytical Strategy*

We adopted a systematic inductive approach to concept development (Gioia et al., 2013) starting with several rounds of open coding our data using NVivo software. We coded all the interview data together; because our interviews were semistructured and allowed for spontaneous respondent insights, we coded across the interviews rather than focusing on a

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<sup>2</sup> The word used in French for network, “réseau,” has no specific connotation in terms of the kind of relationship, and is widely used to designate the valuable relationships someone has in general.

single question or set of questions. After conducting eight interviews separately, two of the authors read all the transcripts several times, coded four randomly chosen interviews independently, then discussed what they saw as main codes in relation to the research question and any discrepancies. Next, they coded four other interviews and repeated the discussion phase. Reaching agreement on most first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013), they completed 26 other interviews independently. This procedure mitigates the unitization and coder reliability issues inherent to qualitative approaches (Campbell et al., 2013).

During coding, the coders regularly wrote memos to capture their thoughts about the data and suggestions of changes in the codebook, which were then discussed several times during the interview process. This iterative process of alternating independent interviews and discussions to solve disagreements led to several additions or fusions of concepts. It resulted in a list of 15 first-order concepts, which, as "informant-centric," aimed to represent and emically encode informant terms (Gioia et al., 2013). As a further check, because 26 of the 34 interviews were coded separately (387 of the 559 quotes assigned to a code in NVivo), we randomly selected 193 of these 387 quotes (50%), ordered randomly, and then each coder assigned each quote to one of the first-order themes. The percentage of agreement was 84.4%. Because the coders had been in constant interaction and discussed disagreements regularly, it is unsurprisingly high.

After this coding step, we sought a third reviewer to read the 34 interviews and first-order concepts to assess the clarity or determine any possible omissions. We recruited a third-year doctoral student with a qualitative research emphasis, a specialization in human resources, and a professional background of nine years in the consultancy world, a setting similar to those from which we drew the sample. This background specialty enabled a further check on the face validity of our categories and bridged our theoretical construction with an

emic perspective. Questions from this researcher led to further discussions that helped clarify the meaning and scope of the codes, resulting in 16 first-order codes.

The second-order analysis sought to find similarities and differences among first-order concepts at increasing levels of abstraction, moving toward theoretical concepts to account for heterogeneity across interviewees (Gioia et al., 2013). At this stage, to further reduce potential bias (Lysova & Khapova, 2018), the third member of the author team entered the data analysis and contributed to the development of theoretical concepts from second-order themes. Consistent with Miles and Huberman (1994), we alternated between emerging codes and literature to identify relationships among existing concepts identified and to delineate the categories. For example, though the career outcomes of developmental networks have been studied, subjective motives and conceptualizations of relationships are less prevalent, enabling us to identify this research gap as an area to which we could contribute. Finally, theorizing the links among our emergent concepts, we inductively formulated a framework to compare the general standpoints toward developmental networks. Figure 1 illustrates our final coding structure and constructs.

-----Figure 1 about here-----

## **Results**

Our inductive analysis revealed three broad conceptions of developmental networks, instrumental, substantive, and explorative, which build on the heterogeneous ways of understanding developmental relationships, which translate into divergent relations to breadth and depth of developmental networks (see Table 2 for illustrative data excerpts).

-----Table 2 about here-----

We used this initial analysis to understand the practical choices of people as they sought to form specific relational configurations, formulating an emergent framework for

subjective developmental networks. Our initial research question asks how people understand their developmental relationships and how these understandings shape their approaches to career-related relationships. Each section in which we present our findings links to each part of this question. First, we consider the instrumental, substantive, and explorative relationships, which refer to people's broad understandings. Second, we consider the breadth and depth of relationships, that is, the relationship approaches derived from people's understandings. Third, we integrate all these elements into a conceptual framework.

### *Conceptions of Developmental Networks*

*Developmental Networks as Instrumental Relationships.* From our analysis, we identified respondents who embrace a purely instrumental view of developmental networks, meaning that they view relationships as characterized by their ability to serve specific functions. As such, they assign specific and structured purposes to relationships (e.g., contacts maintained or developed with some preidentified aim) and think of them as means to ends. Discourses around instrumental relationships involved attempts to purposively pursue some of the career functions described in developmental network literature (Cotton et al., 2011). They included descriptions of how relationships influence the allocation of the most interesting projects and career promotions, which is a critical professional outcome. In this conception, merit and performance, though important, translate into outcomes to the extent that employees receive support from influential, high-profile managers, which is consistent with a political approach to careers (Pfeffer, 1989), according to which developmental relationships are tools to gain organizational power. To illustrate this conception of developmental networks, one respondent, Simon, a senior strategy consultant, notes how personal references establish a basis for work on new projects:



You need people to think about you. That's natural. If I've worked with you and it went well, on the next project, I'm going to go, "Oh yeah, let's call this guy. We worked well together." But if I've got someone I don't know, I've never worked with him/her, no one ever told me anything specific about him/her, I won't call him/her. (ID 17)

As Simon notes, personal references do not substitute for task competence but act as vehicles for transmitting information about competences to trusted others. Such references are instrumental not only for project inclusion but also in later developmental trajectories, as Pierre, a senior strategy consultant, explains:

I've been on nice assignments, assignments that I've liked, and for which I've worked like a dog. That's because I had directors, partners who stood by me, who trusted me, and who would say, "You need to put Pierre on this." And for me to grow in terms of experience, knowledge, rank, pay, and bonuses, that's key. (ID 9)

Pierre's explanation concurs with the previous comment that people need references to get "put on this" project. However, he goes further by noting that growth also depends on such connections, in terms of human capital ("experience, knowledge"), social capital ("rank"), and financial capital ("pay and bonuses").

Beyond useful connections, the instrumental conception involves a broader sense of the role of the self at work and the kinds of relational bonds that should be cultivated. When asked to think about the people who were most influential to his career development, Hervé, a senior consultant in human resources management (HRM), spontaneously cited people who contributed to his internal reputation. He explains that relationships form an underlying system of job allocation at the consultancy, whereby relational construction is a fundamental part of the job:

The network is essential internally, because if you're not known, you just don't work in consulting. Inside a consulting company, you're selling nothing but yourself. And people come get you at times to give you assignments because they are eager to work with you, and they think you will be decisive for the client, you hold expertise others don't have, etc. In this job, you need to make people want to work with you. (ID 19)

As Hervé explains, the functionality of relationships, rather than an extrinsic or incidental part of the job context, is related to the core value proposition of the employee (“you’re selling nothing but yourself”). Furthermore, managing the relational motivations of others (“make people want to work with you”) demonstrates the mutuality of instrumental relationships, whereby other people’s desire for an instrumental network can provide a source of capital for the consultant.

This perspective, because of the mutuality involved, partly reflects the functions of cooptation and collegiality in PSFs, which typically favor political contests among rival coalitions (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). These respondents also cite the protection provided by developmental ties, another noted subfunction (Cotton et al., 2011). They note other career subfunctions too (Cotton et al., 2011), such as acquiring information about goings-on, current issues, upcoming projects, or important people to know. By providing (unofficial) information that otherwise would not be public, such a developmental network provides valuable inputs for strategizing (e.g., talking to a partner about an exciting project before staffing processes even start).

Many interviewees considered the support of personal interests and putting other actors to instrumental use as developmental networks’ *raison d’être*. This vision of developmental networks carries a potential tension between social and professional aspects of relating, to which participants responded by distinguishing between workplace practices and their inner thoughts. Leveraging relationships, in this view, is a game, something one does as an act or, alternatively, because everybody does it.

You need to have tactics with your peers. It becomes natural after a time; you become a bit schizophrenic.... Sometimes, it undermines your personal values. But that's a bit like when you play football: When you enter the football field, you play by the football rules; if you want to play by the rules of basketball, then you play basketball instead. (Kader, senior consultant in quality management; ID 6)

Several respondents insisted on the capability to adjust behaviors and discourses to the audience and specific purpose, echoing what Ferris et al. (2005) describe as political skills—a concept that is, interestingly, sometimes used synonymously with networking (Blickle et al., 2009). Employees with strong political skills leverage these skills “in a manner that disguises any ulterior, self-serving motives and appears to be sincere” (Ferris et al., 2005: 125), enabling them to select and execute appropriate influential tactics depending on the social situation.

*Developmental networks as substantive relationships.* In contrast with the instrumental view of relationships, a substantive view makes the notion of assigning career purposes to relationships problematic. It is based on an aversion to the idea of putting others to instrumental use. Inés, a senior consultant in information systems, illustrates this view by contrasting her use of communications with other approaches:

That's not my view. When I maintain relationships through emails, it's because I like the person, because I feel he/she was nice when we worked together. (ID 33)

As Inés notes, though previous work experience is important, this importance is due to personal factors rather than the task capacities. Respondents often recognized but disavowed the instrumental use of developmental networks:

I have an excellent network, I think, but I am not going to use it. It isn't me. I am always a bit fearful about this opportunism, you see? When I create a link with someone, it's a link of trust, and I don't want to look like an opportunist and eventually break that trust. (Emilie, senior consultant; ID 31)

This excerpt shows the substantive conception of developmental networks is not only a personal value but involves an impression management component (“don’t want to look like an opportunist”), in which people believe the functional aspect of networks sully the personal bond. This notion echoes recent work, suggesting that instrumental networking can lead to negative feelings such as “feeling dirty” (Casciaro et al., 2014). Some people dislike the

notion of hiding true intentions and strategizing about social interactions for specific aims (Bensaou et al., 2014). Therefore, they insist on remaining true to themselves in social interactions, across professional or personal spheres. It also emphasizes the sense of pleasure or intrinsic enjoyment from being with others and engaging with their experiences. Compared with instrumental relationships, substantive relationships involve descriptions of pleasure at spending time with colleagues, as Frederic, a manager specialized in information systems, notes:

We can also go have a drink together or something, though it's not just that.... It's a bit like friendship, in fact. And not just friends in passing, but these are people I see outside of work and have the pleasure of eating and drinking with. (ID 30)

The relationships between such networks and professional life are complex and involve work but dismiss the instrumental aspect, as noted by Lise, a senior HRM consultant:

What I am describing here, workshops, clubs where we meet, organized lunches, it's a method of working. But I do not regard this as a tool. I want to see people, because I am sincerely interested in them. I am passionate about the stories they share. It's always a great pleasure to go and share with people from company X, Y, or Z. The end purpose isn't to do business. Well, it so happens that this is also an outcome. (ID 29)

This standpoint acknowledges that personal relationships can boost careers (“it so happens that this is also an outcome”) but insists that this outcome cannot be the primary purpose of creating or maintaining a link in the first place. Instrumental outcomes are by-products of social interactions, to be entered into only for themselves.

As such, employees with a substantive relational conception mentioned few of the career functions cited in previous literature (e.g., Cotton et al., 2011). They sometimes acknowledged resources or other functional aspects as outcomes of relationships but primarily focused on such functional relationships with other people, not themselves. When describing their own experiences, they mentioned psychosocial functions (e.g., friendship, psychological support, professional recognition) without explicitly linking these factors to their career,

suggesting a more intrinsic valuing of relationships, as Quentin explains with an example from his family relationships:

My two sisters have been models for me, a bit—they are super successful, they showed me the path, in a way. But, in fact, it's more than that. It's that I know I have someone to whom I can turn who won't judge me. Or that will judge me but fairly, for my own good, I mean. They'll speak to me frankly. We grew up together. If I'm not okay, then they see it immediately, and we talk about it. They help me find perspective. If I mess up, they also tell me. And that is very precious to me. (ID 34)

These relationships are developmental but not in a primarily functional sense; rather, the relationship itself provides support (“someone to whom I can turn”) that is intrinsically valuable, and the effects of these relationships on outcomes are not the criteria for evaluating the relationship.

*Developmental Networks as Explorative Relationships.* We describe as explorative a conception in which people intentionally avoid any specific purpose and do not target specific outcomes in their developmental networks. They regard relational outcomes as generally ambiguous and unpredictable in their details and assert that developmental networks' importance is conditional on such ambiguity. Unlike the instrumental conception, which deliberately targets instrumental outcomes, the explorative conception retains a notion of functionality but does not focus on any of the outcomes described in previous literature (Cotton et al., 2011). Such relationships are not instrumental in above sense because they do not have clear goals in mind or try to leverage relationships toward specific outcomes.

Rather, these consultants described their developmental networks as opening a field of possible actions and providing potential (but unspecified) future opportunities and benefits. For example, developmental networks may provide information about job openings in other companies, technical help to complete a task, skill development through learning, and similar possibilities. These interviewees often described how the benefits of a tie emerge over time

and according to unpredictable circumstances. Thus, at any time, no one can appraise the value of a tie with accuracy, and the best policy is to cultivate relationships to provide more generally robust social embeddedness.

Sylvie, a senior strategy consultant, described her work consistently with the explorative conception of networks, focusing on the idea of “anything’s possible”:

For example, I’m in contact with a friend that I met during my study abroad year in Barcelona. That was eight years ago, and I haven’t seen him since. Why did I stay in contact? I don’t really know. Me, I work from the principle that I don’t know how things will evolve. Maybe, one day, I would like to live in Barcelona, it’s a city I like. Or maybe, one day, he won’t even be in Barcelona but will be working in a sector that interests me. Anything’s possible. What is sure is that if I lose contact, I will never know. It would just be another possibility that’s lost. (ID 27)

A palpable sense of uncertainty and a kind of faith in the importance of relating pervades this attitude and differentiates it from a simple instrumental view but also from a substantive view, because a diffuse notion of a providential future linked to socializing is distinct from appreciating relationships for their own sake. This idea of socialization as a reaction to uncertainty was a common element in the explorative attitude, which combines learning, uncertainty, and self-development. For Florence, a senior HRM manager:

You need to be in touch with very different types of people, because what you imagine you want to be doing isn’t necessarily accurate. Someday, you might be doing something else that might make you just as passionate or even more passionate, but this happens only if you speak to a lot of different people and learn more about what they do. (ID 23)

Rather than achieving a specified outcome, it is precisely the ambiguity around objectives and the desire to reveal new objectives to oneself (“what you imagine you want ... isn’t necessarily accurate”) that serves as a motive for relating. As suggested by this quote, intense relationship building and maintenance can occur with a loosely structured set of goals. Maintaining open-endedness enables people to leverage unexpected events,

leading to more serendipitous opportunities (Harmeling & Sarasvathy, 2013) and self-discovery, including the discovery of personal preferences.

Whereas the instrumental conception focuses on the value of contacts' ability to act in the direct interest of focal actors (e.g., a contact who promotes their name or protects them), in the explorative conception, networks' importance involves a source of knowledge or experience, in that they provide access to and help in processing diverse information.

Interviewees noted that the impact of developmental networks depends on their ability to integrate opportunities and information accrued from their contacts. For example, combined information obtained from contacts opens new perspectives and feeds employees' career reflections. In contrast, with developmental network literature, this perspective suggests that some people consider developmental networks as tools for self-change rather than a means of resource provision. As Sophie, a senior manager in sustainability, explains:

I meet people every day, people who make me progress in my thinking, people who open my mind to other worlds, people who give me new ideas. (ID 24)

In this sense, the explorative developmental network conception shares features of the instrumental network, in that some benefit (albeit unspecified) is expected. It also shares with the substantive network the "in and of itself" aspect of focusing on the value internal to a relationship's development. As Gabriel, a senior manager in HRM, explains:

I am also receiving something in return: feedback. I am going to learn something, to know the state of her reflections. This gives me a vision of our business that I can put in perspective with all other people I know in other companies. That's not just investing time; I mean, I have some immediate return. (ID 25)

In Gabriel's explanation, there is a clear orientation toward interest and value in the relationship, but it arises from aspects internal to the relating process (e.g., learning about the other person). The explorative conception thus is not value neutral; it locates value in the process rather than the effect of the relationship.

In this sense, the expressed conflicts noted in the instrumental network conception were less present in discourses for the explorative conception, because respondents did not consider the mutual gain as a form of instrumentalization. Authenticity concerns involved in “using” a relationship became moot, because the process of relating - in itself - was generative of value.

### *Preferred Practice*

Next, we assess the patterns by which each conception (i.e., instrumental, substantive, and explorative) relates to practices involved in enacting (or refraining from enacting) developmental networks. To understand how the consultants focused on different aspects of the relational environment, we identified patterns oriented toward relational breadth and relational depth, differing in the forms of behavior considered valid for career development.

*Depth of the Developmental Network.* An orientation toward depth refers to the belief that the value of the network inheres in the trust and esteem attached to relationships. When focusing on the depth of their developmental network, the consultants mainly described actions oriented toward deepening and consolidating their relationships. As Marc, a manager in strategy, explains:

I just need to meet three or four people who I trust, with whom things go well, and I capitalize on that. I don't multiply; I don't make efforts. I ... build strong relationships with people I have esteem for from a personal and professional standpoint. (ID 8)

That is, Marc intentionally limits his number of relational partners, to increase relational quality and “build strong relationships,” and these relationships involve both “personal and professional aspects” rather than being unidimensional. Notable in Marc’s statement is the lack of “effort.” We found that a depth focus reflected respondents’ belief that relational quality cannot really be affected by deliberate networking. “True” relationships develop, instead, through day-to-day interactions at work and as a by-product of joint task completion,



during which actors demonstrate their abilities and appropriate behaviors. As Jeanne, a senior consultant in HRM, explains:

I think a network built on preexisting relationships is stronger and needs less maintenance. Networking with people you haven't worked with before ... relies on something else, and I find it artificial. (ID 32)

Thus, relational depth is not only a question of quality and multidimensionality but also implies an origin that preexists or obviates deliberate attempts.

The issue of how relationships originate relates to depth, because it implies the continuity of interactions and the accumulations of trust. As Julien, a senior consultant in information systems, explains:

People who support me today are people who saw that I was reliable and that they could count on me. And if I ask them for something, they will get behind me because of this trust. (ID 10)

The development of such relationships takes place through daily collaborations, and the relevant locus of the developmental network is the day-to-day work environment. Such networks seem achievable when embedded in a solid history of coworking that provides a basis for assessing reliability and trustworthiness. The resulting depth creates solidarity among network participants, who support one another for promotions, complete urgent work, and other career-related issues.

*Breadth of the Developmental Network.* Descriptions of the breadth of developmental networks refer to relationships as bridges to distant worlds, characterizing the power of relationships by their ability to provide shortcuts to distinct types of contacts. Compared with the trust and reliability built from the depth of developmental networks, the value of the breadth stems from contacts beyond the immediate work environment. As such, descriptions of broad networks do not involve internal aspects of a single or a few relationships but focus on outcomes beyond a single relationship. For example, Clément, a senior manager in

information systems, notes how his boss can mobilize different parts of the developmental network for the occasion at hand:

Someone I consider ideal in terms of their networking is my boss, who, in any kind of problem, can open his repertoire and immediately think of a person who can help solve a problem, who can bring information he needs. It's someone sufficiently connected, so when there's a problem or a need, there's someone to correspond to that. (ID 11)

The virtue of his boss's network is not its scope per se but the effect of the scope to provide versatile expertise to help with problems or provide needed information. Simon, a senior strategy consultant, elaborates on this idea of keeping many contacts in storage for the right occasion:

For me, having a good network is about having many friends, as they say. Not just people I've met. A person can meet a ton of people in his or her career and keep in contact with them to have a good network. But that will never be as good as someone who has a lot of friends and people they know, which is much more useful than just having worked once with a person and keeping his or her contact information. Because, how often in a year will you have that opportunity: two, three, or four times maximum? So that's two, three, or four people worth keeping in contact with, that's nothing compared with a person with lots of friends who occupy good positions at many different companies and with whom you keep contact. (ID 17)

As Simon notes, not all contacts are created equal; some are "friends," and they are the most useful, but it is because of its variety and scope ("good positions at many different companies") that this network is particularly important, because working directly with someone takes time and limits the number of possible contacts.

Consistent with the notion of breadth, respondents describe the benefits of various relational actors, who are themselves unconnected, for their careers (Burt, 2005; Higgins, 2001). Breadth-oriented people aim for distant spheres, such that they report deliberate activity and energy spent on enlarging their network. For example, Sylvie, a senior consultant in strategy, describes how activities related to extra-role behaviors can broaden networks:

There are many ways to commit to this. For example, I've organized an after-work seminar about change management. There, you meet tons of people. You make a

presentation, people get to know you, and they come and talk to you for all kinds of reasons.... It's an investment. (ID 27)

Such strategies would be inappropriate for a depth orientation, given the preponderance of preexisting relationships and accumulation over time. However, such activities may be well-suited to encounters with new contacts and projecting expertise in an area beyond the immediate office environment.

### **Discussion: Theorizing Developmental Networks as a Subjective Conception**

The above findings confirm the heterogeneous and diverse aspects of developmental networks (Dobrow et al., 2019), as individuals seek different meanings in their relationships (Bernhard, 2018). To develop a theoretical contribution from the categories described in our findings, we formulated a theoretical framework based on different conceptions and preferred practices, illustrated in Figure 2. This framework illustrates how instrumental, substantive and explorative conceptions are structured around specific configurations of relational motives, forms of purposiveness and relationships with authenticity. Figure 2 also shows how these conceptions relate to preferred practices, based on the idea that individuals demonstrate heterogeneous networking practices (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009; Wolff & Spurk, 2019).

Instrumental conceptions of developmental networks were associated with both breadth and depth practices, while explorative conceptions were more linked to breadth practices and the substantive conception to search for depth. Empirically, these connections can be seen, for instance, in the ways that interviewees with explorative conceptions sought out many diverse contacts with heterogeneous knowledge, while those with substantive conceptions emphasized quality interactions and long-term relationships.

---Figure 2 about here ---

Despite this connection between conceptions and practices, one implication of this framework is the need to consider the two as only contingently related, with cross-cutting relations among different conceptions and practices. For instance, the practice of displaying loyalty and reliability is associated with motives pertaining either an instrumental or a substantive relational conception. Similarly, practices such as a structured, proactive behavior (e.g., attending an after-work event to network) may rely on well-defined goals (e.g., increasing visibility to secure a promotion, an instrumental conception). But it could also reflect a routine that, taken more generally, could enable unanticipated and fortuitous events (explorative conception). Furthermore, it enables multidirectionality or bidirectionality among practices and conceptions, such that engaging in certain practices could retroactively lead to the development of career-related subjective conceptions.

Finally, our conceptualizations of instrumental, substantive, and explorative network conceptions are not meant to be mutually exclusive or logically incompatible. It is likely that, in practice, some overlap among the conceptions occurs, or their salience might depend on contextual contingencies, as we elaborate subsequently, in the future research directions. To lay a base for such work, however, we first conceptually outline the different configurations to support emerging theory for subjective conceptions of developmental networks.

*Instrumental networks: Between Breadth and Depth.*

Of the three conceptions of developmental networks, the instrumental conception stood out as the one in which both breadth and depth are described as key elements of a networking strategy. The purposive aspect of developmental networks means that breadth is useful as a tool to convey information beyond the immediate work environment, enabling people to increase their visibility and reputation and gain better assignments and promotions. Consistent with an instrumental conception, the need to be known by as many people as possible was

based on increasing career opportunities and capitalizing on the limited cognitive resources available to recruiters by making their names easily recognizable.

This approach to developmental relationships echoes prior work, suggesting that the value of the breadth or range of the network is crucial for extending the scope of a person's reputation and diversifying sources of information about business or work opportunities (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). In our sample, respondents actively developed and kept contacts as broadly as possible but also exhibited the greatest interest in structured networking (e.g., Shipilov et al., 2014). That is, they target occasions in which people gather beyond their usual work teams, such as after-work drinks or interdepartmental task forces, with the specific purpose of forming ties. Such practices involved extensive reflection on how various events might yield new contacts. Conscious of relationships inside their company, these consultants maintain weak ties with external contacts, such as clients, who offer the potential for future business or recruiting.

On the other hand, an instrumental conception is also compatible with the search for relational depth. For example, for junior members with a few strong ties, contacts at a higher hierarchical level can speak up for them and increase the odds of promotion through their sponsorships. Consistent with a political view of organizations, they perceive relationships as tools in building and sustaining coalitions, with the aim of belonging to a cohesive and mutually dependent informal team or task force, usually revolving around one or two key senior managers. Alternatively, close contacts with advisory functions may enable sharing of organizational knowledge and advice. Often, such developmental resources arise from one or a few people (typically, an influential manager or partner), further favoring greater tie strength. Junior employees depend heavily on senior members, yet the reverse also appears to be true (Eby et al., 2006): Reliable junior colleagues help managers or partners sell and

orchestrate projects, collect information on clients, identifying specific needs, answering calls for bids, or simply completing projects effectively. Thus, regardless of rank, actors tend to search for a stable set of colleagues who exhibit loyalty.

*Substantive Networks and Relational Depth.*

While people with an instrumental conception of developmental networks may prefer both deep and broad relational forms, those holding a substantive conception largely focus on relational quality and thus deep relationships with those situated in the proximal work or personal environment. When describing their developmental networks, they mentioned a few strong ties with deep personal knowledge as something they valued for its psychosocial support. Greater intimacy enables people to share difficulties and frustrations without worrying that the information will be used to their detriment; the risk of self-exposure has been associated with weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). For similar reasons, respondents with a substantive conception focused on horizontal ties with colleagues (peers) who are also friends and described supervisory relationships as less compatible with self-disclosure, consistent with prior findings (Janssen et al., 2013).

Due to its valuing of relational quality, substantive conceptions involve little concern for the variety of developmental networks or the social position of contacts. Yet our respondents mentioned ongoing relationships with current or former supervisors, especially in relationships marked by long and proximate collaborations. In all, the developmental networks of those expressing substantive conceptions were small and limited to the immediate work environment or personal sphere. When asked about planned networking, they either dismissed such practices as irrelevant or actively rejected them as requiring them to cultivate weak ties or detach their ties from work tasks. Mentioning requests for recommendation

references, for example, these respondents tended to refer to people whom they knew extremely well and who could appraise their daily performance.

*Explorative Networks and Relational Breadth.*

In contrast to the substantive conception, explorative developmental networks involve expectations of diffuse resources and opportunities lying beyond the immediate work context. Based on this, we theorize that explorative networks involve relatively limited concern for contacts' status and comparatively more consideration for external than internal ties. Most relationships cited by these respondents were weak ties (e.g., Granovetter, 1973). Believing that opportunities for career development, new assignments, or new knowledge can come from diverse sources, explorative networks tend to maximize ties with different people.

Consistent with conceptions of networks as an uncertain set of future opportunities, explorative networks demand a great deal of time, to maintain ties and keep options open. We encountered various actions directed at such maintenance (e.g., lunches, emails, greetings, social media posts) but particularly noted respondents' insistence that providing assistance or showing concern for other people's needs was a core strategy of maintaining an explorative network. Tie maintenance is combined with activities to initiate new ties in what could be termed "network exploration" both inside but, more importantly, outside their firm.

An important difference from instrumental networks is the weak level of selectivity: respondents expressed a willingness to seek any opportunity to make or maintain ties, rather than targeting certain events or contexts. These respondents experience networking as an unstructured process, through which most situations provide occasions to form new relationships.

In summary, our characterization of different subjective conceptions of developmental networks underlies wider strategies of relating at work and across spheres. Practices of

relational breadth and depth follow from beliefs about the nature and purposes of developmental relationships.

### **Summary and Contributions**

Despite abundant anecdotal evidence that employees think strategically about their relationships in everyday practice (Kuwabara et al., 2018), little empirical (Bensaou et al., 2014; Kim, 2013) or theoretical (Kuwabara et al., 2018; Porter & Woo, 2015) research has investigated the different ways that employees conceptualize their developmental networks. Focusing on this question, we have outlined different emic conceptions of developmental networks and their related practices of building career-relevant relationships. Next, we elaborate on our contribution to existing literature to support an emerging research agenda for subjective conceptions of developmental networks.

#### *Contributions to Developmental Networks*

Our research objective was to contribute to understanding developmental networks from the actors' point of view, a contribution which we established along several dimensions. First, we depart from literature in this area by noting the heterogeneity in type and level of purposiveness as a central dimension for conceiving of the role of developmental networks. Current discussions of people's expectations of developmental networks and how such expectations affect networking motivations and practices remain largely conceptual (e.g., Farh et al., 2010; Porter and Woo, 2015). Most prior work also begins with an assumption of a finite list of clear-cut benefits to be inventoried, which drives networking practices in a means–ends fashion and assumes that the logic acts similarly for all people. Our analysis instead acknowledges heterogeneity in purposiveness. Some people exhibit the means–ends logic that characterizes most research on developmental network "functions" (Cotton et al., 2011; Dobrow et al., 2012; Higgins, 2001). But others regard network benefits vaguely and



with less precision; they consider these benefits as playing out over longer periods and depending on circumstances. This more explorative view implies the need to manage developmental relationships actively with a generalized sense of purposiveness but without specific instrumental purposes, given the serendipitous nature of career development (Krumholtz, 2009). Finally, some developmental networks are marked by a rejection of purposiveness in social interactions, based on the dissonance created by leveraging social relationships for instrumental benefit. People with such conceptions may benefit from networks but resist ideas that such benefits drive their relationships, insisting on the social bond as prior to and a priority over instrumental outcomes. Pointing out and describing such heterogeneity calls attention to basic assumptions made about human agency when studying developmental networks. Although evident in our sample, the means–ends rationality (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) coexists with other ways of understanding relationships.

Second, the combination of active networking behavior with loosely defined goals that characterized the explorative conception suggests that prior literature has ignored some ways that careers can benefit from developmental networks. Literature on networking (Porter & Woo, 2015; Wolff & Moser, 2009) has not deeply questioned the forms of purposiveness that underlie these behaviors. Career studies might better consider the capacity of people to maintain open-endedness in their relational development, enlarging the scope of opportunities and allowing unexpected events to shape their relationships.

This serendipitous dimension of developmental networks is interesting for further research, which could borrow from advances in entrepreneurship literature on the role of contingency and process in relationships (Engel et al., 2017; Harmeling & Sarasvathy, 2013). Such “happenstance” processes and the ability to organize around them has been theorized by Krumboltz (2009), whose notion of learning to plan for the unplanned is particularly relevant

in a labor market of increasing uncertainty, where adapting so as to capitalize on serendipity is important for career development (Kindsiko & Baruch, 2019). Explorative networks may be one of the possible responses to such difficulties in planning for specific outcomes and developing a career in a world of moving targets.

The explorative conception also extends thinking about developmental networks, in that, beyond a means to a specific end, it enables relationships to transform and shape ends. Rather than a refutation of the value of benefits, it implies a distinct understanding of their nature, opening avenues for theorization. Because networking activities can be considered a tool for exploring and nurturing new career goals, it involves a feedback loop into the subjectivity of the employee, who is changed by the network rather than simply deriving benefits from it. Network advantages emerge as relationships influence focal actors' progressive reflections on their careers, shaping career goals. In this sense, a hard and fast line between instrumentalized and noninstrumentalized relationships may be difficult to draw, because of the high level of abstraction and low definition with which people conceive explorative networks. If goals and relationships iteratively influence one another, then the relationship is not instrumental in a straightforward sense, though it remains an important part of career development. Such a conception adds nuance to prior work that has mainly considered developmental networks as tools of preexisting inner goals (e.g., Cotton et al., 2011), recommending that people "should seek particular combinations of exchange functions—that is, particular types of developers—based on their career goals and professional context" (Dobrow et al., 2012: 16)

Third, we move developmental network theorizing forward by noting how people link the form of purposiveness to specific interpretations of what Casciaro et al. (2014) call the "moral self-justification of networking." The substantive conception simply rejects purposive

networking in the name of truth to the self, a stance forcing individuals to disavow benefits as secondary or coincidental. The explorative conception also invokes truth to the self as a cornerstone of networking yet allows a positive attitude toward networking practices. This view is possible, because networking is considered intrinsically and mutually beneficial.

Fourth, instrumental conceptions deal with “moral self-justification” by abstracting the workplace from their “true” self, viewing it as a stage or game board, and separating what they think and who they are from what they display in social interactions. Networking takes the form of a display of political skill (Ferris et al., 2005). These findings shed light on the moral justification mechanisms of networking, a topic that has remained marginal in dominant functionalist approaches to developmental networks (e.g., Casciaro et al., 2014).

#### *Managerial Contributions*

Because of the importance of developmental networks to career processes, human resources managers should be aware of the variety of ways that employees are likely to understand their networks. By better understanding the subjective variety of developmental networks, firms can try to customize their efforts to train or raise awareness about their value, avoiding misunderstandings that might result from different conceptions of what networks are for and how to approach them. It is symptomatic of a negligence of this approach that most anecdotal evidence we collected points to managers presuming a one-size-fits-all approach in their informal discourses and advice. Our study offers clear advice: Managers should be aware of and work with the diversity of their employees’ network forms, using them to understand different career goals and personal perceptions at work.

Our study also has implications for how individuals consider their own career management. For example, people with an instrumental conception that emphasize purposiveness might gain from being more attentive to the less visible and more serendipitous

outcomes of developmental relationships. Deeply concerned with outcomes, they may paradoxically ignore positive outcomes that are less identifiable but that are taken into account in an explorative conception. Also, those holding a substantive conception of networks may have ongoing tensions reconciling the benefits they derive from relationships with their belief in the irrelevance of these benefits. More generally, because of the importance of self-awareness for relational practice to change (Chandler et al., 2010), an understanding of the heterogeneity of developmental networks might be instrumental for employees to understand and reflect on their career strategies.

### **Future Research Directions and Limitations**

Several issues remain open for further research around the subjective aspects of developmental networks. Perhaps most centrally, each of the relational conceptions described above involves beliefs about the dynamic and temporal properties of networks, their short- and long-term qualities, and the processes by which trust is established and maintained. Our study offers a cross-sectional view of beliefs about dynamic processes and would be complemented by processual approaches that track the development of relational network beliefs.

Existing literature offers evidence that individual understandings of network mechanisms evolve through learning (Janicik & Larrick, 2005) and that relationship development is dynamic (Dobrow & Higgins, 2019; Kim, 2013), so the conceptions we have identified might evolve over career lifecycles. Research thus could examine the reciprocal influences of subjective network beliefs with practices directed toward network establishment to track the mutual composition of subjective and objective features of developmental networks. Although the current study, with its focus on agency, implicitly moves from understanding to practices, we do not deny the possibility of reverse or mutual influence.

Such research would be able to nuance our understanding of agency within career processes by revealing how subjective networks translate (or not) into objective career outcomes.

Relatedly, research should examine the factors that influence the adoption of the different conceptions of developmental networks by focal actors. One avenue would be to focus on the role of individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits, career anchors); social norms or team- and organizational-level factors also might influence network conceptions. The relative influence of such factors could inform organizational decisions regarding selection (of individual differences) or managerial practices (for group influences). The differences we find across conceptions (i.e., how respondents understand relationships as developmental) call for further investigation, particularly with regard to how they shape self-definitions of career success, planning, and exploration.

We also did not consider instrumental, substantive, and explorative conceptions as mutually exclusive or beyond interindividual variation. These different conceptions might overlap on the basis of contextual contingencies and within individual career strategies, including at different career phases. For example, though explorative relationships are not straightforwardly instrumental, they might exhibit a vague form of nonspecific instrumentality that would be appropriate in rapidly changing or ambiguous environments. Similarly, substantive relationships within learning-rich environments, such as expert cultures or research-related activities, could expose individuals to new knowledge and overlap with explorative relationships. In such contexts, the different relational conceptions likely come into differential alignment or tension, a dynamic perspective that suggests an avenue for further research.

Importantly, we asked our respondents about their relationships in a general sense, without specifying whether they should list workplace or non-workplace (e.g., friends,

family) relationships. Although respondents spontaneously brought up both kinds of relationships, there was a dominant emphasis on relationships that either currently or previously appeared in a work context. Relatedly, a question for future research is how the relation between work and non-work spheres manifests in the construction of developmental relationships (Murphy & Kram, 2010). For example, in which conditions do respondents immediately call to mind mentors or colleagues when considering career development, rather than family support? Similarly, whereas our responses were dominated by “positive” support, more neutral relationships, such as “ambivalent and indifferent” ones (Methot et al., 2017) or negative relationships, also have potential impacts on career outcomes (Labianca & Brass, 2006). This question is important for the broader goal of differentiating developmental networks from narrower conceptions of networking as career advancement (Baumeler et al., 2018; De Klerk & Verreynne, 2017; Kuwabara et al., 2020).

In our findings, we did not specifically ask about advancement, but about networks more generally; the resulting categorizations contained both narrowly economic conceptions (instrumental), relationship-centered conceptions (substantive) and learning-oriented conceptions (explorative). Yet because of the potential overlap between these conceptions, to be sure to elaborate and isolate the non-functionalistic aspects of developmental relationships, future research could specifically ask respondents to avoid advancement-related motives in their responses. As a broad-based inductive study, such targeting was outside of our scope, but given the predominance of instrumentalist conceptions of networking in the literature (e.g. Huang, 2016; Wanberg et al., 2019), such work would be warranted.

We examined developmental networks in a consultancy setting drawn from a highly relational job type in an elite professional sector. Thus, our sample might have a higher

concentration of individuals with proactive, positive attitudes toward networking, who likely hold elaborate schema around career-related networking. A more critical picture of developmental networks could emerge in situations of more limited or concentrated networks or in more precarious or nonprofessionalized sectors. For example, relational forms might be different in sectors such as film or music, in which gatekeepers have concentrated power and winner-takes-all economies prevail, implying different forms of relational work (Alacovska, 2018). In such sectors, people might consider explorative or noninstrumentalized relating as a luxury, because every contact counts for the next job. In addition, our relatively homogeneous French sample might be complemented by examining developmental networks in more ethnically and culturally heterogeneous groups, in which patterns and motives of relating might be distinct.

### **Conclusion**

Our article contributes to a subjective understanding of developmental networks in relation to career development. Emerging research developments have located networks at the subjective level (Bensaou et al., 2014; Kuwabara et al., 2018). Our study emphasizes the heterogeneity of subjective developmental networks, characterizing this diversity and theorizing its relevance for networking practices. Under the broad umbrella of networking, people develop ideas about why and how to relate to one another, how many relationships they should have, and what purposes these relationships serve. By beginning to unlock the subjective aspects of developmental networks, we provide a basis for research to examine the beliefs and processes that accompany relationship building. Thus, we support relational views of career development, acknowledging that relationships also exist in the minds of those who relate, and their ideas about what relationships are and should be are instrumental for what they become.

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Table 1. Sample characteristics

Sex	Age	Grade	Consultancy Area	Years in consultancy	Years in current position	Interview duration (minutes)	ID
F	50	Partner	Organization	21	4	60	1
F	37	Partner	Strategy	13	1	68	2
M	35	Senior manager	Strategy	8	2	80	3
F	38	Senior manager	Strategy	8	1	81	4
M	40	Senior manager	Public administration	10	2	88	5
M	35	Senior manager	Quality management	8	1	75	6
M	32	Manager	Information systems	8	2	67	7
M	30	Manager	Strategy	2	1	58	8
M	26	Senior consultant	Strategy	4	1	64	9
M	27	Senior consultant	Information systems	4	1	70	10
M	36	Senior manager	Information systems	8	2	79	11
F	30	Manager	Strategy	7	1	58	12
M	33	Manager	Finance	4	1	66	13
F	28	Manager	Strategy	4	1	56	14
F	30	Manager	Strategy	4	1	82	15
M	30	Manager	Strategy	7	2	51	16
M	29	Senior consultant	Strategy	4	1	60	17
M	30	Senior consultant	Innovation	4	2	66	18
M	34	Senior consultant	Human resource man.	3	2	84	19
M	29	Senior consultant	Strategy	2	2	84	20
F	25	Senior consultant	Strategy/purchasing	2	2	66	21
M	60	Partner	Strategy	16	1	70	22
M	43	Senior manager	Human resource man.	16	4	50	23
F	40	Senior manager	Sustainability	13	1	66	24
M	38	Senior manager	Human resource man.	5	1	79	25
M	39	Manager	Finance	8	2	71	26
F	30	Senior consultant	Strategy	6	1	52	27
F	28	Senior consultant	Human resource man.	3	1	64	28
M	41	Senior consultant	Information systems	11	7	67	29
M	38	Manager	Information systems	16	6	82	30
F	30	Senior consultant	Organization	5	5	66	31
F	32	Senior consultant	Human resource man.	2	2	61	32
F	32	Senior consultant	Information systems	1	1	85	33
M	34	Senior consultant	Information systems	9	7	55	34

Figure 1. Data structure: first- to third-order themes (left to right)

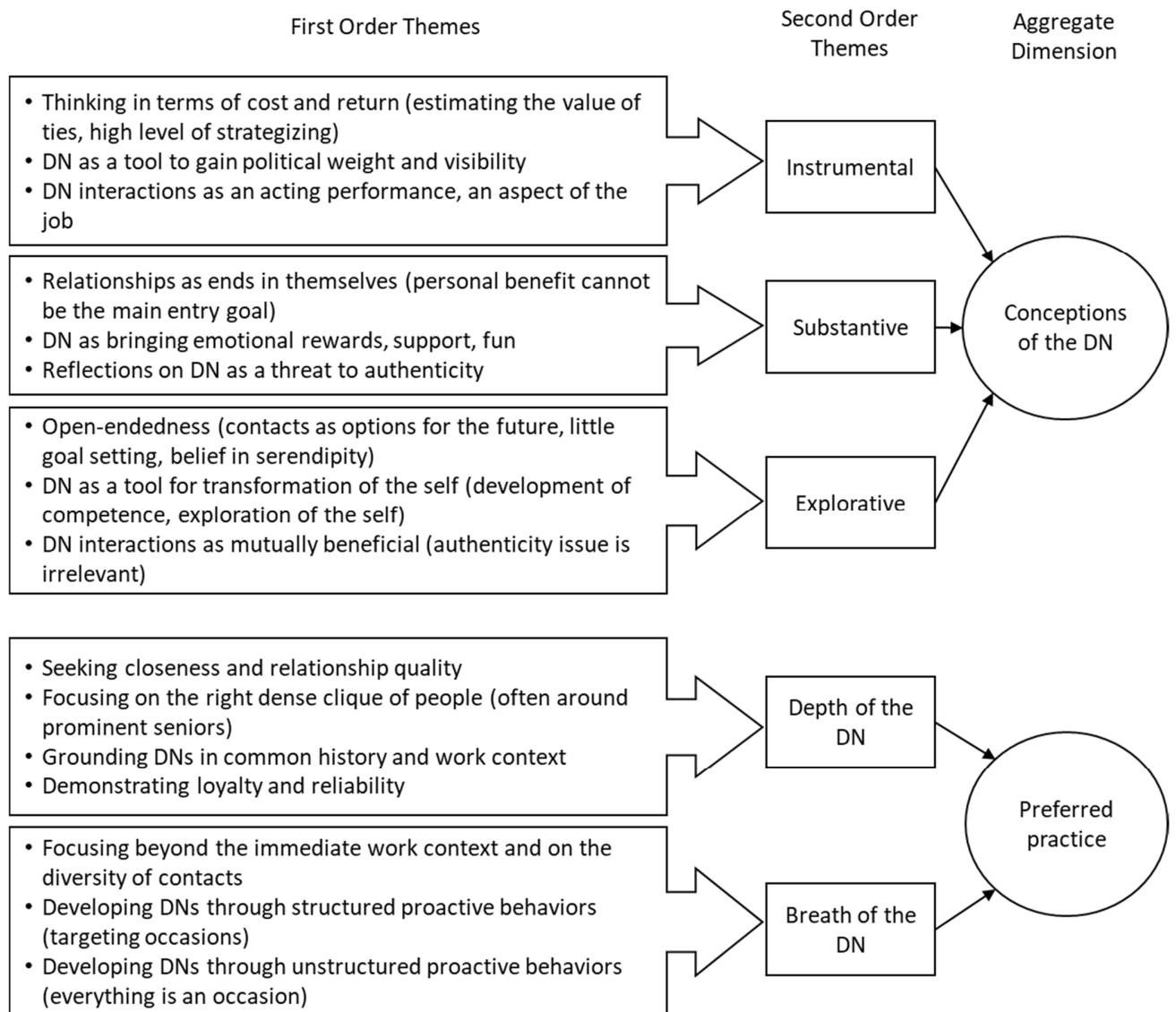


Table 2. Illustrative quotes for all first-order concepts

<b>Aggregate dimension: conceptions of the developmental network (DN)</b>	
<b>Second-order</b>	<b>First-order (with illustrative quotes)</b>
<b>Instrumental</b>	<p><b><i>Thinking in terms of cost and return (estimating the value of ties, high level of strategizing)</i></b></p> <p>I take the effort to send a message to someone or suggest an after-work drink or dinner with someone. It would never have occurred to me spontaneously, from a strictly friendly standpoint, but I try to make the effort so that things work out, because there are benefits from it. (ID 20)</p> <p>Beyond just the motive of helping people, you need to make a number of people indebted, to place a good number of people in a situation where they will have to reciprocate, to return the favor, where they will just be unable to refuse something you ask. For example, you intervene through someone you know—someone in the cabinet of a ministry—so that a partner, say one of the most prominent partners in the company, gets a decoration. I think this is a super strong gesture, and it will leave a mark on the partner's mind. (ID 1)</p> <p><b><i>DN as a tool to gain political weight and visibility</i></b></p> <p>The first part is to identify who the right person is. The one who will be able to help you climb the ladder and who will be the real sponsor, what we call a true sponsor. You can be extremely smart and bright, [but] if you haven't got a sponsor, you will not move up. Moreover, to be able to hope for upper levels, you need to have several sponsors, not just one. And, for example, in my case, to become a senior manager would have required that I build some tie to people at a level higher than the level of my main sponsor. (ID 7)</p> <p>The internal network is essential, because if you're not known, you just don't work in consulting. Inside a consulting company, you're selling nothing but yourself, and people come get you at times for an assignment because they are eager to work with you, and because they think you're going to be decisive for the client, you hold expertise that others don't have, etc. In this job, you need to make people want to work with you. (ID 19)</p> <p><b><i>DN interactions as an acting performance, an aspect of the job</i></b></p> <p>Some people, it's not really natural, you can tell they are forcing themselves. They are a bit clumsy or they don't have the right tone. You need to understand who you have in front of you to know what tone to take, so to speak. You need to adapt. You need to adapt to the context, the person, and the situation, to adopt the right tone. (ID 10)</p> <p>The strategy, in my opinion, really works only if you package this with an appearance of concern for others. You can't come and just say, "Look, I'm the most beautiful, the strongest, see what I can do!" People won't like it. (ID 16)</p>
<b>Substantive</b>	<p><b><i>Relationships as ends in themselves (personal benefits cannot be the main entry goal)</i></b></p>

I am sincere. That means if I want to see people, it's because I am sincerely interested in them. I am passionate about the stories people share with me. It's always a great pleasure to go and share with people at company X, Y, or Z. The end purpose isn't to do business. (ID 29)

That is not my motivation to keep in contact. It's because I like the person. That is really odd to think of keeping in contact with someone to find a job sometime later, like it can serve my goals later. (ID 21)

***DN as bringing emotional rewards, support, fun***

If you have no support from the top management, that's terrible. You lose self-confidence, you lose motivation.... And that's when having a network, both professional and friendly, plays a tremendous role. You get support. (ID 33)

I have relationships with a lot of people who will never bring me any business. It's not for the business, it's for my personal wellbeing. It simply does me good, I need it to feel good. But, maybe a lot of people don't need that. (ID 2)

***Reflection on DNs as a threat to authenticity***

That's a limit I assign to myself, and that I won't cross. When I feel that the person is going to feel that I have an interest, when I feel it's a purely driven motivation, I don't feel comfortable so I just refrain from doing it. (ID 34)

I see the return, in theory. But I can't find energy to do this. I find it so fake. It's a question of pure interest, and maybe it does provide returns, there are a lot of examples. But I just can't see myself doing this. (ID 8)

**Explorative *Open-endedness (contacts as options for the future, little goal setting, belief in serendipity)***

People live their lives. Meaning that the CEO of a company, say one, two, or four years later, might become the CEO of another company. So, all of a sudden, he/she will have new needs and will call you back. And even if that's not the case for one particular person, it's good to contact him/her anyway, so that his/her own network can become yours. (ID 22)

You can't just maintain ties with people you like. You need to maintain relationships with people you've met and who may prove useful someday. Well, you can't systematically know in advance that Mr. [current CEO of a big French company in the transportation industry] is going to become the CEO of [big French company in the transportation industry]. Well, you see this happened to me. That's typical. I had met this guy long ago. So, you go "damn what a big mistake!" It's too late then, the opportunity for a relationship has gone. (ID 5)

I call people regularly to ask how things are going, basically, to find out any news. Because I'm thinking that I'm never totally safe with my ongoing missions. You must always have backup plans. There's an idea that there needs to be support all around to keep working and keep doing what you want. (ID 21)

***DN as a tool for transformation of the self (development of competence, exploration of the self)***

I meet people every day, people who make me progress in my thinking, open my mind to other worlds, people who give me new ideas. (ID 24)

They make me evolve; they reflect on topics that interest me. I can see how it can impact the business I'm in. These are core issues that I need to

reflect on. It's food for thought, I mean. (ID 28)

***DN interactions as mutually beneficial (authenticity issue is irrelevant)***

No one is here to do charity work. You have people who will work together with some managers to progress. And we're all rational people: some people need certain things, I need other things.... Well, we can find common ground and work intelligently. (ID 9)

If it's purely driven by your interest, it does not work anyway. I remember big flops when I attempted to enter a relationship or maintain one only for my own interest. I could tell it wasn't going to work. I tried nonetheless, because I had some pressure and, as expected, it did not work. (ID 18)

**Aggregate dimension: preferred practice**

**Second-order**      **First-order** (*with illustrative quotes*)

**Depth of the DN**      ***Seeking closeness and relationship quality***

There are probably 20 people, I would say, with whom I have particular ties for various reasons. For example, we are friends outside of work or we like to work together or spend time together, let's say. Or there are people with whom I work a lot, partners, in particular, who aren't my friends, but I spend a lot of time with them. So we have ties, we're in a specific network. (ID 3)

In the professional sphere, I keep in contact with former clients, like, sending a card for the new year, calling every once in a while to catch up, etc. I do this, because I like the people I've worked with and I've developed true relationships. (ID 14)

***Focusing on the right dense clique of people (often around prominent seniors)***

For example, Lydie [one of the partners] and I, we did not know each other seven years ago. And now she's my daughter's godmother. It seems silly, but she's supported me forever, helped me, and vice versa. And I owe her my position as senior manager now. I don't think you can become a senior manager and survive without the support of a strong network of friends, people with whom you share values, you have the same functioning, and there is total transparency and mutual support. (ID 4)

You need to know the partners; you need to know the managers as well. In fact, you need to know all the decision makers: the decision makers who know who to send to a particular assignment, or the decision makers who know what calls for bids are coming up that you may participate in and eventually seize some opportunity to change to another division or the like. (ID 13)

***Grounding DNs in common history and work context***

I am not the type to maintain professional relationships with some people or the clients I've had. They are more friendship kind of relationships; we have gone through tough times at some point, people with whom we've done great things together. (ID 30)

That's connections I have accumulated during my experiences, people with whom I've worked ..., people I've helped out of very difficult situations. At [Company C], we've worked on a massive job preservation plan, which was very challenging for the boss. When it's two in the morning and

you're still preparing a round of negotiations for the morrow, it does create bonds. And I've always used particular care to keep them. (ID 25)

***Demonstrating loyalty and reliability***

I think being reliable, that's the basis. A network is fine, but you can mobilize it only if you have it. You should never betray it, so I think you need to be reliable.... You need to take the time to listen to people's expectations to understand and answer them. (ID 10)

It's not very sophisticated, I don't do anything complex, I don't organize dinners at home and stuff like that. I just make myself available, because it's really about that. I know if I need a hand or a document or some feedback, I can ask them. And if they need that from me, they know they can ask. I'll find time to do it, and I know they'd find time to do it. (ID 1)

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**Breadth of  
the DN**

***Focusing beyond the immediate work context and on the diversity of contacts***

I try to connect to every layer, horizontally and vertically. I know every business unit, every market. I have at least four or five buddies in every market and at several hierarchical levels. (ID 15)

For me a good network, that's lawyers, experts in accounting, people in business schools... People who have different types of networks compared with mine. And I am going to be able to help them when they need something on short notice, collaborate on a competitive bid, etc., and also consult with them when I want to take a step back from a professional situation and ask them, "What should I do?" (ID 28)

A good network is when someone manages to cover the entire scope. Someone who will be able to get you people, competences, opportunities, others who will bring positions, new assignments, visibility. This is the ideal network; you've got all components in it. (ID 13)

***Developing DNs through structured proactive behaviors (targeting occasions)***

This is my priority, clearly: try to be more physically present in Paris at the headquarters. And sign up to several internal taskforces beyond my projects. This is my priority to grow my internal network. There are regular opportunities to participate in some taskforces for some internal functional need like knowledge management. There, you can meet a lot of people. (ID 26)

It works pretty well, but you need to go further. The network also comes from a strong commitment to [Company C], which goes beyond the purely professional side. At [Company C], we are quite active on this, we do a lot of things: we've got the basketball club, the football club, the opera club, etc. And, in practice, every one of these clubs is a little cluster of professional relationships. (ID 2)

***Developing DNs through unstructured proactive behaviors (everything is an occasion)***

I attend professional trade fairs to promote my company. You happen to meet other people at lunch there..., but, in fact, it's the same as anywhere else. For me, every moment is an occasion for encounters and opportunities. (ID 24)

You meet people all the time. I mean, friends of friends at a party, people on a train. So, you say, "Okay, tell me, what do you do?" Then you tell them what you do. And, maybe from this chance encounter and during these small talks, you'll find there's a way you can work together. (ID 29)

Figure 2. Conceptions of developmental networks and their relationship to preferred practice

