Career mentoring in context: A multilevel study on differentiated career mentoring and career mentoring climate

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This study explores how supervisor career mentoring contributes to contemporary organizational career development, which strives to foster employees’ promotability while strengthening their intention to stay. Specifically, we focus on the implications of career mentoring in team contexts. Applying a multilevel framework, we distinguish between individual-level differentiated mentoring (i.e., an employee’s mentoring perceptions as compared to those of other team members) and group-level career mentoring climate (i.e., the average perception across all group members). In a workplace setting, we collected data from vocational job starters (N ranged from 230 to 290) and their company supervisors (N ranged from 56 to 68). We find that career mentoring climate positively relates to promotability, more so than differentiated career mentoring. Both career mentoring climate and differentiated career mentoring are positively related to the intention to stay. At the individual level, this relationship is mediated by job satisfaction. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of differentiated and group-level mentoring.

KEYWORDS
career motivation, intention to stay, mentoring, multilevel framework, promotability

1 | INTRODUCTION

In today’s dynamic and accelerated business environment, organizations’ need for adaptability has resulted in flatter organizational hierarchies and frequent restructuring programs (e.g., Guadalupe & Wulf, 2008). This trend has changed the nature of organizational career development, such that lifelong employment and predictable career paths along hierarchical promotions cannot be automatically assumed (Voelpel, Sauer, & Biemann, 2012). Instead, career development needs to become more flexible to ensure an adaptable workforce and requires career support from supervisors in addition to career self-management from employees (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Due to their proximity to and influence on employees’ work reality, supervisors play a major role in supporting employees’ career development (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007) and thereby help to implement and complement human resource management functions (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatensby, 2013; Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Supervisors may, for example, provide employees with instrumental support for career advancement through the provision of learning opportunities and sponsorship (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). This supervisory behavior, referred to as career mentoring, seems a promising means to achieve the development and advancement of employees (Kim, Egan, Kim, & Kim, 2013; McDonald & Hite, 2005; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

Traditional approaches imply that career mentoring primarily operates at the individual level as it enables individualized experiences that support protégés’ career progress (e.g., Alfes et al., 2013). However, the effectiveness of mentoring is contingent upon how employees evaluate their mentoring experience (Eby, Butts, Durley, & Ragins, 2010). For example, mentoring effectiveness suffers when employees doubt whether they can meet their mentor’s expectations.
Employees’ career mentoring perceptions are not only shaped by their idiosyncratic mentoring experiences but also by observing their supervisor’s mentoring behaviors toward others in the group, such that career mentoring may operate at both the individual and the group level (Nielsen & Daniels, 2012). We propose that these different conceptualizations of career mentoring will have differential effects on supervisor-rated promotability and employees’ intention to stay.

Promotability and intention to stay are important outcomes for both individual employees and human resource management practices in organizations. Evaluations of employees’ promotability are important for the career development of individual employees, their actual promotions, and career success (De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt, & Klehe, 2009). From an HRM perspective, promotability evaluations are the input for succession planning and for developing a talent pool that enables organizations to adapt to changes in the environment (Conger & Fulmer, 2003; Karaevli & Hall, 2003). Employees’ intention to stay or — the opposite — their turnover intention is important as it is a predictor of actual turnover, which may cause a shortage of qualified personnel, financial costs, and lower organizational performance (e.g., Heavey, Holwerda, & Hausknecht, 2013; Park & Shaw, 2013).

At the individual level within a group, different employees establish relationships of varying quality with their supervisor (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975), such that some employees report higher or lower levels of received career mentoring than others. To assess an employee’s unique mentoring experience in comparison to other group members, we adopt Nielsen and Daniel’s (2012) operationalization of differentiated leadership (i.e., differences in leadership behaviors toward individual followers) and define differentiated career mentoring as the deviation of an employee’s individual career mentoring perception from the shared career mentoring perceptions within the group. Differentiated career mentoring characterizes the extent to which an employee receives relatively more or less career mentoring as compared to others in the group. Differentiated mentoring can take on a negative sign when an employee receives less career mentoring than other group members, and a positive sign when an employee receives more career mentoring than other group members.

Based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), we will argue that experiencing relatively more career mentoring strengthens an employee’s career motivation (Day & Allen, 2004), which in turn should foster an employee’s promotability as rated by the supervisor (see Figure 1).

Additionally, while career motivation could enhance employees’ promotability, it could also encourage employees to seek attractive career opportunities outside the organization (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003) thereby undermining an organization’s ambition to retain skilled and talented employees. However, one could also argue that differentiated career mentoring will positively affect employees’ job satisfaction, which in turn will tie them to the organization (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). We therefore investigate alternative hypotheses pertaining to the negative or positive effect of career mentoring on employees’ stay intention by examining the mediating role of career motivation and job satisfaction, respectively (see Figure 2).

At the group level, group members’ average mentoring perceptions represent the overall mentoring climate in the group. Group members develop “consensual assessments of the most significant environmental features” (Zohar & Luria, 2005, p. 617) and collective sense-making through exchanging their experiences (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999). Like other climate constructs (e.g., Schreurs, Guenter, Schumacher, Van Emmerik, & Nortelaers, 2013; Zohar & Luria, 2005), mentoring climate assesses the average level of mentoring that group members perceive, that is, the shared mentoring perceptions of individual group members (Bliese, 2000). Dysvik and Kuvass (2012) argued that employees’ shared climate perceptions of positive supervisor behaviors shape a favorable developmental climate in which employees feel supported to advance their careers. We extend this proposition and argue that mentoring climates can affect promotability and the intention to stay beyond differentiated mentoring as high-quality mentoring climates not only support skill development among all group members but also signal an organization’s serious concern with creating career opportunities for all (rather than only some of) their employees.

In this study, we contribute to the literature on career mentoring in two important ways. First, we extend previous research that focused on isolated mentoring experiences of individual employees (e.g., Allen et al., 2004) by also including the group context of career mentoring. Individual experiences and behaviors do not occur in a vacuum but are influenced by the social context (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999).

**FIGURE 1** Research model differentiated career mentoring, career mentoring climate, and promotability (according to the supervisor)

**FIGURE 2** Research model differentiated career mentoring, career mentoring climate, and intentions to stay
Moreover, group-based organizational structures have become ubiquitous in today’s business world (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003) and mentoring by supervisors has become increasingly important as a tool of organizational career development. Hence, it is important to understand supervisory career support in group contexts. Being part of a collective (the work group), employees will likely compare their own mentoring experiences with those of others in the group. Hereewith they give meaning to these experiences as reflecting their relative standing in the group. Moreover, employees will observe their supervisors’ mentoring behaviors toward others in the group, and they will communicate their mentoring experiences with their group mates, which will result in shared mentoring climate perceptions or a group mentoring climate. In this study, we provide a new perspective on mentoring as directed at individual employees and the work group as a whole. We propose that the function of mentoring goes beyond providing individual career support, as mentoring may also generate a climate of organizational career support, which benefits the prospects and well-being of all (rather than some) group members.

Second, in this study we integrate theory and research from different literature domains. Using social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), we link literatures on differentiated leader behaviors and organizational climates to central themes (i.e., developing and retaining employees) in the domain of human resource management. Both differentiated leader behaviors and organizational climate affect employee responses (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012; Van Vianen, De Pater, Bechtoldt, & Evers, 2011; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010), but extant research has explored these relationships separately. As a result, we know little about their combined effects. In the current study, we simultaneously examine whether and how differentiated career mentoring and career mentoring climate contribute to employees’ promotability and intention to stay. Our study design combines individual and group-level experiences and processes to provide an integrated picture of how these experiences may add to each other. Integrating social comparison theory and social information processing theory helps to understand the beneficial and/or detrimental outcomes of differentiated and group-level career mentoring. Differentiated career mentoring may—through social comparison—advance employees’ career motivation. This, in turn, may promote employees’ promotability (see Figure 1) but undermine their stay intention (see Figure 2). However, differentiated career mentoring may also foster job satisfaction, which will facilitate employees’ decision to stay. We therefore include both career motivation and job satisfaction as possible mediators in the relationship between differentiated career mentoring and intentions to stay (see Figure 2). Furthermore, we propose that group-level career mentoring may—through social sharing—advance both promotability and intentions to stay (see Figures 1 and 2).

Next to these theoretical contributions, our study informs organizational practice. Investigating the combination of differentiated and shared career mentoring experiences is important: Differentiated career mentoring may prompt employees to seek opportunities outside the organization, whereas a high-quality mentoring climate may prompt them to stay. In this study, we aim to resolve a dilemma that many organizations may face: whether to invest in the career development of some or all employees with the risk of getting no return on investment (through early turnover).

This article unfolds as follows. First, we elaborate on how supervisors affect the career development of individual employees by offering career support. Next, we argue that supervisors may show differentiated mentoring behaviors that are salient to employees and we develop hypotheses about the relationships between differentiated career mentoring and employees’ promotability and intention to stay. We then describe how employees form shared perceptions of their supervisors’ career mentoring behaviors resulting in a career mentoring climate. Specifically, we argue why we believe that career mentoring climate relates to promotability and intention to stay beyond differentiated career mentoring.

2 | CAREER MENTORING

Supervisors play a crucial role in employee’s career development by offering mentoring (Baranik, Roling, & Eby, 2010; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Typically, two broad mentoring functions are distinguished (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Kram, 1985): psychosocial mentoring and career mentoring. Psychosocial mentoring refers to facilitating the development of employees’ confidence and work effectiveness by providing a positive role model, counseling, and coaching (Noe, 1988; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000), whereas career mentoring refers to instrumental assistance for career advancement. Perceptions of psychosocial mentoring are much more bound to the person of the supervisor, whereas career mentoring is apt to generating perceptions of the organization. A recent meta-analysis showed that psychosocial mentoring has a stronger influence on the relationship quality with the supervisor than career mentoring, whereas career mentoring has a stronger impact on employees’ affiliation with the organization. Therefore, this study focuses on career mentoring as this form of mentoring enables broader organizational experiences beyond the relationship with the immediate supervisor (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

Supervisors who provide career mentoring give their employees challenging assignments and learning opportunities, assist them in achieving their goals, and bring them in contact with influential people in the organization (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). De Pater et al. (2009) showed that challenging assignments and learning opportunities foster an employee’s promotability as evaluated by the supervisor. Promotability entails supervisors’ “perception of an individual’s capacities and willingness to effectively perform at higher levels” (De Pater et al., 2009, p. 298). From an organizational perspective, the identification of promotable employees is crucial for building and developing a pool of employees who are able to fulfill a broader set of roles, which enables an organization to effectively adapt and respond to changes in the business environment (e.g., Nauta, Van Vianen, Van Der Heijden, Van Dam, & Willemsen, 2009). For individual employees, favorable promotability evaluations create better opportunities for actual career advancement (Van Scotter, Motowidlo, & Cross, 2000; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999).

Whereas career mentoring seems to have a generally positive effect on career success, its relationship with intention to stay is more ambiguous because increasing employees’ career potential might make them more suited for career opportunities outside the
organization (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005). Therefore, we also take into account potential downsides of career mentoring in order to evaluate how useful career mentoring is for organizations. In sum, we examine whether and how differentiated and shared career mentoring experiences are related to promotability and employees’ intention to stay.

2.1 | Differentiated career mentoring

Although career mentoring seems beneficial for all employees, supervisors may vary in the extent to which they provide career mentoring to each group member. Research on leader–member exchange (LMX) showed that the quality of the relationships between leaders and employees differs significantly (Dansereau et al., 1975; Li & Liao, 2014). This variability in the quality of LMX relationships has been referred to as LMX differentiation (Liden et al., 2006). In a similar vein, differentiation in mentoring relationships may exist within a group, which will be experienced and observed by the group members.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) postulates that individuals tend to compare themselves to other people, particularly to those in their direct social environment. The phenomenon of social comparison has been studied in, for example, research on organizational justice. Justice theory and research emphasize the importance of social comparison processes for evaluating individual experiences and outcomes (e.g., Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001). Hence, differentiated supervisor behaviors seem salient to employees (Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008). Vidyarthi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, and Ghosh (2010) studied social comparisons among employees related to differentiated supervisor behaviors. They explored whether employees’ actual relative relationship quality with the supervisor in comparison to their colleagues would trigger social comparisons. They found that employees’ actual relative relationship quality was indeed reflected in their subjective perception of their differentiated relationship status in the group. In addition, Wu et al. (2010) found that differentiated leadership (i.e., a leader who behaves differently to different group members) resulted in divergent experiences among group members, such as differences in leader identification and self-efficacy beliefs. All in all, social comparison theory and extant research on the effects of differentiated leader behaviors suggest that differentiated career mentoring will be associated with divergent member outcomes, such as their promotability and stay intention.

2.1.1 | Promotability

When assessing employees’ promotability, supervisors tend to particularly rely on the extent to which employees engage in challenging job experiences (De Pater et al., 2009). Employees who do so may show that they are able to perform the challenging activities that are part of higher-level jobs. Employees who experience individual career mentoring have a greater opportunity to engage in challenging tasks, to acquire a broader set of skills and to show their ability to fulfill responsible job roles as compared to their colleagues (De Pater et al., 2009; De Vos & Soens, 2008). We therefore hypothesize that differentiated career mentoring will be positively related to employees’ promotability evaluation as assessed by the supervisor.

Furthermore, supervisor promotability evaluations will not only depend on impressions of an employee’s abilities but also on their motivation to advance their career (De Pater et al., 2009). When career motivation is high, individuals assign personal importance to their career, feel self-efficacious to master career challenges, and plan their further career development (Carson & Bedeian, 1994; London, 1983). Obviously, employees who are highly committed to their career will be evaluated as more promotable than employees who lack career motivation, because motivation is generally conceived as an important prerequisite for effective functioning and career advancement (De Vos & Soens, 2008; Eby et al., 2003). Therefore, we hypothesize that career motivation will be positively related to promotability.

Career mentoring will enable employees to gain more successful career experiences and be confident to cope with career challenges (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Research found that supervisors who showed mentor-like behaviors (e.g., providing challenges and clear performance feedback, and encouraging employees to set career goals) created high levels of career motivation among their employees (Day & Allen, 2004; Noe, Noe, & Bachhuber, 1990). In line with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; J. V. Wood, 1996), experiencing more career mentoring as compared to peers will serve as an indicator for one’s relative career potential. In contrast, employees receiving less individual career mentoring than their peers will question whether they have the necessary abilities for career advancement (Wood & Bandura, 1989), which will undermine their career motivation. We therefore propose that differentiated career mentoring will facilitate an employee’s career motivation.

Our reasoning that differentiated career mentoring will facilitate employee career motivation and promotability and our proposition that career motivation contributes to supervisor assessment of employee promotability suggest that differentiated career mentoring will positively relate to supervisor-rated promotability via its association with career motivation (see Figure 1).

Hypothesis 1: Differentiated career mentoring positively relates to promotability via career motivation.

2.1.2 | Intention to stay

The effect of differentiated career mentoring on employees’ intention to stay may depend on the specific processes that are activated (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005). Above, we argued that differentiated career mentoring fosters career motivation. However, high career motivation may not only trigger deliberations about career opportunities in the organization (thereby facilitating promotability), but also thoughts about career options outside the organization. Employees high in career motivation may realize that changing employers could be an effective way to speed up personal career progress (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). These employees invested in their human capital, which increases their marketability for the external job market (Eby et al., 2003). Accordingly, employees with high career motivation might be more likely to accept employer transitions in order to achieve their career goals faster. This motivation-driven process
implies that differentiated career mentoring causes loss of human resources and human resource investments for the organization.

In accordance with our previously outlined reasoning, stating that differentiated mentoring increases career motivation, we propose a negative indirect effect of differentiated career mentoring on the intention to stay (see Figure 2).

**Hypothesis 2:** Differentiated career mentoring negatively relates to the intention to stay via career motivation.

People’s decision to remain in or leave the organization also depends on how satisfied they are with their current job. Job satisfaction describes an individual’s general affective attitude toward the job (Spector, 1997), which includes career-related job components such as the perceived availability of developmental opportunities and promotions, and social relationships at work (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Weiss, Dawis, & England, 1967). There is abundant evidence that job satisfaction causes employees to be less oriented toward mobility (Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000; Tett & Meyer, 1993; Van Dam, 2005) and causes intended and actual job changes (Giffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Maertz & Campion, 1998).

Research has evidenced a relationship between career mentoring and job satisfaction (Allen et al., 2004; Kammerly-Mueller & Judge, 2008). First, career mentors provide their protégés with psychological support, which is a predictor of job satisfaction (e.g., Harris, Winskowski, & Engdahl, 2007). Second, mentoring theory describes that mentors offer their protégés opportunities for development through access to challenging tasks (Kram, 1983; Russell & Adams, 1997), which promote perceived meaningfulness of work (e.g., Brown & Leigh, 1996; Kahn, 1990), intrinsic motivation (e.g., Gagne, Senecal, & Koestner, 1997), work engagement (Kahn, 1990; Van den Broeck, De Cuypier, De Witte, & Vansteenkiste, 2010), and job satisfaction (e.g., Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Podsakoff, Lepine, & Lepine, 2007). Moreover, Preenen and colleagues (Preenen, De Pater, Van Vianen, & Keijzer, 2011) found that challenging job experiences and on-the-job-learning were negatively related to employees’ turnover intention and job search. All in all, career mentoring theory and research suggest a satisfaction-driven process with differentiated career mentoring fostering employees’ stay intention via increased job satisfaction. Therefore, in contrast to Hypothesis 2, which predicts a negative effect on the intention to stay via heightened career motivation, we propose the following alternative hypothesis (Figure 2):

**Hypothesis 3:** Differentiated career mentoring positively relates to the intention to stay via job satisfaction.

Career mentoring concerns the unique relationship between the supervisor and the employee but may also characterize the organization. In the next section, we elaborate on possible group-level effects of career mentoring.

2.2 | Career mentoring climate

With the increasing importance of group contexts (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003), multilevel theorists have discussed whether leader behavior is best represented in terms of individual perceptions or in terms of a shared leadership climate that emerges from the shared perceptions of employees who work with the same supervisor (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

Nielsen and Daniels (2012) suggested that in group contexts, leader behavior may manifest as independent theoretical concepts at the individual and the group level. Although supervisor mentoring behaviors are directed at the individual rather than the collective level (Kunze, De Jong, & Bruch, 2016; Wu et al., 2010), when these behaviors are consistently shown, group members may perceive them as reflecting a characteristic of the work environment (González-Romá, Peiró, & Tordera, 2002). Supervisors are “climate engineers” as they shape the meaning employees attribute to events at work (Naumann & Bennet, 2000). For example, employees who are exposed to a supervisor who consistently reinforces organizational procedures infer a general favorable procedural justice climate (Naumann & Bennett, 2000). In a similar vein, when employees are exposed to a supervisor who consistently shows career mentoring behavior, they infer a general favorable or high-quality mentoring climate (Van Vianen et al., 2011). This informal mentoring climate should be distinguished from formal career mentoring programs in which the organization matches mentors to protégés. Formal mentors are more likely than informal mentors to be viewed as marginally satisfying (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000) and formal mentoring seems less effective than informal mentoring (e.g., Underhill, 2006).

Whereas the beneficial effects of informal mentoring in dyadic, one-on-one relationships have been well documented (Allen et al., 2004), research has not yet theorized about the effects of a mentoring climate in groups in which supervisors maintain relationships with several employees. A high-quality career mentoring climate meaningfully extends the dyadic supervisor–employee relationship in that it paves the way for a variety of organizational experiences in the form of challenging assignments and access to developmental and networking opportunities for all instead of only some individuals (Baranik et al., 2010).

Organizational support theory (OST; e.g., Eisenberger & Stinghamber, 2011) proposes that employees develop a general perception concerning the extent to which the organization cares about their well-being. This perceived organizational support in turn affects employee outcomes such as organizational commitment (Rhoodes & Eisenberger, 2002). A high-quality career mentoring climate reflects that the organization takes care of the career development of her employees. We therefore argue that a mentoring climate will go beyond the individual supervisor-employee relationship in increasing individual career outcomes. In this study, we propose that career mentoring climate explains additional variance in promotability and intention to stay beyond differentiated mentoring.

2.2.1 | Promotability

In a high-quality mentoring climate, supervisors offer a rich learning environment for all employees (Amy, 2008; Marsick & Watkins, 2003), giving them opportunities to acquire a broad set of career-relevant competencies. When supervisors readily promote organizational experiences through networking opportunities and challenging assignments, employees are likely to conclude that these activities
are valued in the organization. A development-oriented climate not only motivates employees to apply their knowledge in practice (Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004), so that they improve and broaden their skills, but also enhances employees’ willingness to grow through learning (Nauta et al., 2009).

Group members in a high-quality career mentoring climate who report relatively less career mentoring compared to their peers (i.e., negative differentiated mentoring in the group context) may still receive substantial developmental support compared to employees in a low-quality career mentoring climate. Likewise, group members in a low-quality career mentoring climate who report relatively more career mentoring compared to their peers (i.e., positive differentiated mentoring in a group context) may nevertheless receive less developmental support compared to employees in a high-quality career mentoring climate. Altogether, a favorable career mentoring climate benefits the development of most (if not all) employees in a group and will, above and beyond differentiated career mentoring, foster employees’ capacity to fulfill a broader set of responsible roles, thereby increasing employees’ promotability.

While differentiated career mentoring is proposed to affect individual career motivation due to processes of social comparison in a group, career mentoring climate will not relate to individual differences in career motivation because a career mentoring climate represents the shared work environment of all group members. Therefore, a high-quality career mentoring climate will foster promotability directly because it promotes the development of all employees in the group compared to employees in a low-quality mentoring climate.

We propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** A career mentoring climate positively relates to promotability beyond differentiated career mentoring.

### 2.2.2 | Intention to stay

Both social comparison theory and social information processing (SIP) theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) argue that people do not only compare themselves to other people but are also interested in and affected by the experiences and opinions of others (e.g., Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). According to SIP theory, information cues such as the beliefs, expectations, and behaviors from the social environment affect individual expectations and behaviors. Through social information, employees focus their attention on specific aspects of the work environment and give meaning to organizational events. For example, continuous career supportive behavior by supervisors will lead employees to interpret that the organization is career supportive because supervisors are expected to transmit an organization’s values to the daily work environment (Schein, 2004). Another example is that employees in a high-quality career mentoring climate observe the developmental activities of other group members and/or communicate their career mentoring experiences. These sources of information are used to characterize the organization as bringing its career supportive values into practice.

These seminal psychological theories align with perceived organizational support (POS) theory (Eisenberger et al., 2002), which postulates that employees develop general views about the extent to which the organization cares about their development and well-being. According to organizational support theory (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2011), employees develop perceptions of organizational support through attributing the treatment they and their peers receive to the organization’s positive intentions. Meta-analytic work (Kurtessis et al., 2005) has shown that supervisor support is the strongest predictor of perceived organizational support, because supervisors provide rewards and resources to employees on the organization’s behalf (e.g., Renwick & MacNeil, 2002). A career mentoring climate represents a shared work environment that affects all group members similarly. Hence, employees in a high-quality career mentoring climate will attribute the favorable career mentoring treatment they and their peers receive to the organization’s positive intentions to support the careers of her employees. Perceptions of organizational (i.e., career) support, in turn, elicit a norm of reciprocity or process of social exchange wherein employees are willing to put effort in their organization’s success with the expectation that this effort will lead to future rewards, such as learning and promotion opportunities. Indeed, perceived organizational support was found to be strongly related to social exchange (Kurtessis et al., 2005). Moreover, perceived organizational support also results in greater identification with the organization as it fulfills socioemotional needs such as esteem and emotional support (Kurtessis et al., 2005). Employees who incorporate organizational membership into their self-identity wish to stay in their organization (e.g., Cole & Bruch, 2006).

Indeed, employees who experience career mentoring have been shown to consider their organization an attractive employer (Baranik et al., 2010; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Wayne et al., 1999), which strengthens their commitment to the organization. Van Vianen et al. (2011) investigated the combined effects of individual climate perceptions and climate quality (i.e., group members’ average climate perceptions) on employee commitment. They found that climate quality explained variance in employee commitment to the organization above and beyond individual climate perceptions. We expect to find comparable results for employees’ stay intention. Based on the previous, we propose that a career mentoring climate will relate to the outcome (stay intention) directly. While differentiated career mentoring is proposed to affect individual job satisfaction due to processes of social comparison in a particular group, we expect that career mentoring climate will affect employees’ stay intentions due to processes of social exchange and identification. We thus propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 5:** A career mentoring climate positively relates to intention to stay beyond differentiated career mentoring.

### 3 | METHOD

#### 3.1 | Participants and procedure

Vocational job starters and their respective company supervisors of a German facility management company participated in the survey.
Germany has a unique, standardized vocational training (apprenticeship) system that lasts three to four years and is organized in a dual educational system. Trainees work at their employing company about four days a week on average in order to acquire the necessary practical skills that are needed to practice the respective craft or profession. Although vocational schools ("Berufsschulen") provide complementary theoretical education, the major focus of the apprenticeship is the company-based on-the-job training that distinguishes a German apprenticeship from academic training.

We chose this sample for three reasons: First, trainees are in an early career stage and therefore sensitive to career-related topics relevant to our research hypotheses (Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dikkers, 2010). Second, workplace mentoring by trainees’ supervisors has a crucial impact on early career development because trainees acquire their professional skills through their work at the company. Finally, due to the lack of qualified employees, German organizations are highly interested in developing and retaining trainees. In the participating company, 95% of the trainees receive an offer for permanent employment. Our sample was therefore perfectly suited to test our research hypotheses.

Two researchers collected data from trainees and supervisors at the company during working hours. For practical reasons and to ensure a representative sample, we invited those individuals who could not attend the first meeting for data collection to participate on a second occasion about six months later. Overall, 73% of the company’s apprentices attended one of the meetings for data collection, and 94% of these participated in the survey. Supervisors answered questionnaires about three months after their trainees participated in the survey. A total of 378 trainees completed the questionnaire. We excluded 58 trainees who could not be matched to a supervisor as well as supervisors who were only responsible for a single trainee, because this data could not be meaningfully used for our group context analyses. Finally, we ensured that data from at least 60% of a supervisor’s trainees contributed to the multilevel analysis. Applying these selection criteria, we obtained a sample of 230 trainees and 56 supervisors (average group size: 4.11, range 2–12) for the model on promotability ratings, which were not available for all trainees, and a sample of 290 trainees and 68 supervisors (average group size: 4.27, range 2–14) for the intention-to-stay model.

Of the final sample, 243 trainees participated on the first occasion and 47 trainees on the second one. Most participants were male (86%) and German (76%) with a mean age of 20.01 years (SD = 2.86). While 33% were trained to be professional building cleaners,1 59% were trained for a technical profession (e.g., electrician, industrial mechanic), and 8% for a clerical profession. On average, trainees were in their second year of apprenticeship (M = 1.99, SD = 0.92). Participants were representative for all trainees at the company in terms of apprenticeship duration (M = 2.02, SD = 1.00) but technical trainees were somewhat underrepresented (57% of the population). Demographic information about nonparticipants was unavailable due to strict data protection regulations. Supervisors were responsible for the company-based training at the company throughout the duration of the apprenticeships and had several years of experience (M = 7.21, SD = .606). Most supervisors were male (85%) and German (84%) with a mean age of 45 years (SD = 9.79).

3.2 | Measures

Participants rated all items on a scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Supervisors provided promotability assessments, whereas trainees rated all other variables. We computed scale mean scores to represent each construct.

3.2.1 | Career mentoring2

We measured career mentoring with six items, adopted from existing measures (Noe, 1988; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). A sample item is “My supervisor provides me with challenging assignments.” Career mentoring was modeled as latent variables, such that differentiated career mentoring was modeled at the individual level, whereas group-level perceptions of mentoring (career mentoring climate) were modeled at the group level (see data analysis section, cf. Nielsen & Daniels, 2012). This scale had a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .86.

3.2.2 | Career motivation

Ten items from existing scales (Carson & Bedeian, 1994; Day & Allen, 2004) represented career motivation. A sample item is “I have clear career goals.” One item (“Given the problems I encounter in my professional career, I sometimes wonder if it is worth it,” reverse-coded) was excluded because it reduced the scale reliability considerably. The final nine-item scale had a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .82.

3.2.3 | Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction was measured with three items from Hackman and Oldham (1975) such as “All in all I am satisfied with my job.” This scale had a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .80.

3.2.4 | Intention to stay

We chose three items that emphasized career-related aspects to measure the intention to stay. We used two items from Sturges, Conway, Guest, and Liefgoogh (2005). A sample item is “I have made plans to leave this organization if it cannot offer me a rewarding career,” reverse-coded. We added one item that we developed specifically for this context: “I will probably stay with this organization after my apprenticeship.” This scale had a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .84.

3.2.5 | Promotability

Supervisors rated trainees’ promotability with two items (adapted from De Pater et al., 2009), for example, “This employee demonstrates the ambition to work in a higher position.” The item correlation was r = .83 (p < .001), which justifies aggregation of the items into a promotability scale.

3.2.6 | Control variables

We identified a list of possible control variables based on previous research. In order to preserve statistical power, researchers should only include control variables that significantly affect the outcome variables (Becker, 2005; Becker, Atinc, Breughe, Carlson, Edwards, & Spector, 2016). We therefore selected only those control variables from the following list that were relevant in our sample based on preliminary analyses. Mentoring researchers recommend controlling for
demographic factors (ethnicity, gender, age, and length of relationship) represented by year of apprenticeship and time spent with supervisors (e.g., Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001). Human capital, represented by educational level, is also an important predictor in career development (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Finally, we considered profession (cleaning, technical, and clerical) and time of data collection as sample-specific variables.

### 3.3 Data analysis

First, we tested the measurement model (a CFA) with career mentoring, career motivation, job satisfaction, and intentions to stay as four separate factors. Modification indices indicated that within the career mentoring scale, four intercorrelations needed to be specified and that within the career motivation scale, two intercorrelations needed to be specified. As these intercorrelations concerned items within the theorized scales, we included them in the four-factor model, resulting in adequate model fit ($\chi^2=411$, $p < .001$, comparative fit index [CFI] = .91, Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = .90, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .06, standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .07). An alternative model (allowing the same items to correlate as in the previous model) in which all the items load on one factor displayed insufficient model fit ($\chi^2=1283$, $p < .001$, CFI = .59, TLI=.53, RMSEA = .14, SRMR = .14). Also, other models such as several two-factor models (see Table 1) were inferior to the hypothesized four-factor solution.

Multilevel SEM models are more computationally demanding than single-level SEM models because of the costs of computing and within-level components and associations need to be estimated. Thus, analyzing many variables in one multilevel model requires large sample sizes to achieve sufficient power. While information on 290 trainees was available for the intentions to stay model, the sample size for the promotability model was smaller ($N = 230$) due to missing values. As a consequence, combining both dependent variables into one model would have the disadvantage of testing an even more complex model with a smaller sample. To preserve statistical power, we therefore decided to test the models separately for each dependent variable.4

### Table 1 Measurement model: Confirmatory factor analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fit indices</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>411 (178)</td>
<td>1283 (184)</td>
<td>1213 (183)</td>
<td>1051 (183)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>$&lt; .001$</td>
<td>$&lt; .001$</td>
<td>$&lt; .001$</td>
<td>$&lt; .001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta \chi^2$</td>
<td>872 ($6^3$)</td>
<td>802 ($5^3$)</td>
<td>640 ($5^3$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLI</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model 1: Hypothesized four-factor model including career mentoring, career motivation, job satisfaction, and intention to stay; Model 2: one-factor model; Model 3: two-factor model (factor 1: career mentoring, career motivation, and satisfaction; factor 2: intention to stay); Model 4: two-factor model (factor 1: career mentoring, career motivation, and intention to stay; factor 2: satisfaction).

As we conducted a multilevel analysis, we assessed the between-group variance on all variables in baseline models without predictors that served as comparison models to evaluate the path models. For the promotability model, the between-group variance was significant for career mentoring ($\tau_{00} = .10$, $p = .03$), marginally significant for promotability ($\tau_0 = .09$, $p = .08$) but nonsignificant for career motivation ($\tau_{00} = .00$, $p = .73$). For the intention-to-stay model, the between-group variance was significant for career mentoring ($\tau_{00} = .08$, $p = .02$), job satisfaction ($\tau_{00} = .10$, $p = .01$), and intention to stay ($\tau_{00} = .15$, $p = .04$), but nonsignificant for career motivation ($\tau_{00} = .01$, $p = .56$). The lack of between-group variance regarding career motivation indicates that there is a considerable level of variance within teams: team colleagues differ from each other in terms of career motivation. This suggests that career motivation is an individual-level construct, which may be contingent upon individual-level influences, such as differentiated career mentoring. Corrected ICC(1) for the outcome variables were .10, $F (55,174) = 1.46$, $p = .04$ for promotability and .11, $F (67,222) = 1.55$, $p = .01$ for the intention to stay, and indicated that employees differed in the outcome variables due to their group membership, so that multilevel analyses were appropriate.

Similar to Nielsen and Daniels (2012), we applied a multilevel approach to operationalize differentiated and group-level mentoring and modeled both constructs via latent variable decomposition. Within- and between-level parts of the variables are separated and modeled as independent latent variables (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2010). The within-level part reflects the deviation of a individual's perception from the shared, average perception of a supervisor's mentoring behavior and represents differentiated mentoring.

Differentiated mentoring can take on positive values when a trainee perceives more mentoring than his/her colleagues as well as negative values when a trainee perceives less mentoring than his/her colleagues. The between-level part represents career mentoring climate, which is the average perception of all trainees rating the same supervisor. Our data support aggregation for career mentoring (corrected ICC(1) = .09, $F(67, 216) = 1.45$, $p = .03$; ICC(2) = .31; mean rwg ($J = .78$). According to LeBreton and Senter (2007), these intraclass coefficients can be considered as medium, whereas this interrater agreement can be considered as strong.

We used multilevel structural equation modeling (Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010) to test the hypothesized relationships between differentiated career mentoring and the outcome variables, which represent within-level (1-1-1) mediation models (e.g., Zhang, Zyphur, & Preacher, 2009). This approach combined several advantages: First, we could assess the relationships between differentiated career mentoring and the outcome variables (Hypotheses 1–3) while controlling for group-level career mentoring. Second, we could examine whether mediation occurs at the individual or at the group level. For this purpose, a mediator with significant between-level variance was modeled as a latent variable at both levels. Next to Sobel tests, we provide 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect obtained via a Monte Carlo simulation (Selig & Preacher, 2008). Third, based on these models, we were able to test whether career mentoring climate has a contextual effect above and beyond differentiated career mentoring and explain additional variance in the outcome variables (Hypotheses 4 and 5). In order to explore whether a contextual effect
is meaningful, Enders and Tofghi (2007) recommend testing whether the direct effect of differentiated career mentoring is significantly different from career mentoring climate.

Career motivation was group-mean-centered and modeled only at the individual level due to a lack of group-level variance. At the individual level, categorical control variables were uncentered (Nezlek, 2011), whereas continuous control variables were grand-mean-centered to partial out possible between-level differences (Enders & Tofghi, 2007).

### 3.4 Results

Before conducting the main analysis, we explored the association between the nominal control variables and outcome variables (e.g., Becker, 2005). Neither profession nor type of educational degree was related to promotability or the intention to stay ($F < 2.77, .06 < p < .93$; Bonferroni post-hoc group comparisons showed no significant group differences). When controlling for the nested data structure, participants on the first occasion received more favorable promotability ratings ($b = -.29, p = .04$), and older trainees ($b = .06, p = .01$) and participants on the first occasion ($b = -.30, p = .06$) reported higher levels of the intention to stay. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the dichotomous and ordinal variables.

### 3.5 Differentiated career mentoring

#### 3.5.1 Promotability

Figure 3 represents the relationship between differentiated career mentoring and promotability. The model fit was excellent ($\chi^2[1] = 4.20, p = .04$; $\text{CFI} = .83$, $\text{TLI} = -.02$, $\text{RMSEA} = .12$, $\text{SRMR}_{\text{within}} = .04$, $\text{SRMR}_{\text{between}} = .02$; $\Delta \chi^2 = 4.12$). Hypothesis 1, proposing a positive relationship between differentiated career mentoring and promotability via career motivation, received no support. Although the paths connecting differentiated career mentoring with career motivation ($b = .10, p = .03$) and career motivation with promotability ($b = .22, p = .02$) were significant, the indirect effect was not ($ab = .02, p = .14, 95\%$ confidence interval (CI) [$.00; .06$]). The predictors reduced the proportion of unexplained individual-level variance (Snijders & Bosker, 1994) for career motivation ($R^2_{\text{within}} = .21$) and for promotability ($R^2_{\text{within}} = .13$).

#### 3.5.2 Intention to stay

Figure 4 shows the relationships between differentiated career mentoring and the intention to stay. Although not hypothesized a priori, we added a path connecting job satisfaction and career motivation because model fit indices indicated serious misspecification otherwise ($\chi^2[5] = 30.73, p < .001$; $\text{CFI} = .83$, $\text{TLI} = .48$, $\text{RMSEA} = .14$, $\text{SRMR}_{\text{within}} = .08$, $\text{SRMR}_{\text{between}} = .04$). As this link is in line with previous research (Goulet & Singh, 2002; Kim et al., 2013), we included it in the final model, which showed excellent model fit ($\chi^2[4] = 3.29, p = .51$; $\text{CFI} = 1.00$, $\text{TLI} = 1.02$, $\text{RMSEA} < .001$, $\text{SRMR}_{\text{within}} = .02$, $\text{SRMR}_{\text{between}} = .01$). Our proposed model demonstrated superior model fit against a

### TABLE 2  Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Measurement point*</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.01 (2.86)</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderb</td>
<td>0.86 (0.35)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicityc</td>
<td>0.24 (0.43)</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship year</td>
<td>1.99 (0.92)</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time with supervisor</td>
<td>12.57 (10.50)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career mentoring</td>
<td>2.96 (0.84)</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career motivation</td>
<td>4.07 (0.57)</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>3.85 (0.94)</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.00*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotabilityd</td>
<td>2.81 (0.92)</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.07*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>-.07**</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to stay</td>
<td>2.68 (1.15)</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 290$. Cronbach’s alpha for scales indicated in brackets on the diagonal.

* First measurement point = 0, second measurement point = 1.

b female = 0, male = 1.

c German ethnicity = 0, non-German ethnicity = 1.

d For two-item measures correlations are reported instead of Cronbach’s alpha.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

---

![FIGURE 3](multilevel_1_1_mediation_model_propromotability)**

---

**FIGURE 3**  Multilevel 1-1-1 mediation model for promotability regressed on differentiated career mentoring (*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$)**


FIGURE 4  Multilevel 1-1-1 mediation model for intentions to stay regressed on differentiated career mentoring. *Estimated because of significant between-level variance (Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010) (’p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01)

reversed comparison model with paths from job satisfaction and career motivation to differentiating mentoring ($\chi^2[6] = 7.65, p = .26; CFI = .99, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .03, SRMR within = .04, SRMR between = .01; \Delta \chi^2 = 4.36$). Hypothesis 2, which proposed a negative indirect relationship between differentiating career mentoring and the intention to stay via career motivation, was not supported ($ab = .07, p = .01, 95\% CI [-.04; .01]$). The direct association between differentiating career mentoring and career motivation was not significant ($b = .05, p = .29$). Instead, differentiating career mentoring was only indirectly linked to career motivation via its association with job satisfaction ($ab = .07, p = .001, 95\% CI [.03; .13]$). Although only marginally significant, the negative association between career motivation and the intention to stay ($b = -.23, p = .06$) was in line with our general reasoning. Hypothesis 3, proposing a positive indirect effect of differentiating career mentoring on the intention to stay via job satisfaction, received support ($ab = .25, p < .001, 95\% CI [.14; .37]$). Overall, the individual-level predictors explained variance in career motivation ($R^2_{within} = .33$), job satisfaction ($R^2_{within} = .09$), and the intention to stay ($R^2_{within} = .36$).

3.6 | Career mentoring climate

3.6.1 | Promotability

Expanding the analysis to the group level, we explored whether career mentoring climate explained additional variance in promotability beyond differentiating career mentoring (Hypothesis 4, Figure 3). In line with our hypothesis, the difference between the group and individual level direct effect parameters was marginally significant ($\gamma_{01} - \gamma_{10} = .65, p = .054$). The model explained 42% of the between-level variance in promotability. Taken together, the results indicate that career mentoring climate was positively associated with promotability.

3.6.2 | Intention to stay

We found support for Hypothesis 5, as career mentoring climate explained additional variance in the intention to stay beyond differentiated career mentoring ($\gamma_{01} - \gamma_{10} = .71, p = .04$, Figure 4). The model reduced the amount of unexplained between-level variance in the intention to stay ($R^2_{between} = .56$). Thus, career mentoring unfolded its positive association with the intention to stay via two levels. At the individual level, differentiated career mentoring was indirectly and positively related to the intention to stay via job satisfaction. At the group level, trainees reported higher levels of the intention to stay when they worked in a high-quality career mentoring climate.

4 | DISCUSSION

Given the importance of mentoring by supervisors in contemporary organizational career development and the increased importance of teams, we explored how career mentoring operates at distinct levels in group contexts in their relationship with promotability and the intention to stay. At the individual level, we considered differentiated career mentoring, that is, the deviation of an employee’s perceived career mentoring from the average career mentoring perceptions in the group. We suggested that differentiated career mentoring would have a positive indirect effect on promotability and a negative indirect effect on the intention to stay via career motivation. These hypotheses were not supported. Instead, we found that differentiated career mentoring related to career motivation via job satisfaction, meaning that employees who experienced relatively more career mentoring than their peers were also more satisfied with their job. Higher job satisfaction, in turn, was associated with a stronger career motivation. Our results showed that supervisors assessed employees as promotable to the extent that employees reported a relatively stronger career motivation. Career-motivated employees showed a somewhat weaker intention to stay in the organization than employees who reported less career motivation.

At the group level, we included the shared perceptions of career mentoring among group members, reflecting the career mentoring climate in the group. We found that the career mentoring climate explained additional variance in promotability and the intention to stay beyond differentiated career mentoring.

4.1 | Theoretical implications

This study is the first to highlight the group context of career mentoring. In doing so, we extend previous research. Our framework extends traditional mentoring theory and research, which focused on isolated mentoring experiences of individual employees (e.g., Allen et al., 2013), to group contexts. Using social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Eisenberger & Stinghamber, 2011), we link literatures on differentiated leader behaviors and organizational climates to the development and retention of employees and reveal that career mentoring indeed operates at different levels. It is noteworthy that the positive effects of career mentoring also reside at the group level: a high-quality career mentoring climate fosters employee promotability and stay intention. When supervisors engage in career mentoring aimed at all employees, they contribute to a favorable development-oriented
organizational climate, as learning and career opportunities in the organization become visible and accessible to employees (Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, & Bravo, 2011; Nauta et al., 2009). This finding corroborates research on perceived organizational support and research showing that career mentoring contributes to perceptions about the organization in general (Baranik et al., 2010; Kraimer et al., 2011; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997) and highlights the central role of the supervisor in this regard.

Our findings extend the human resource management literature that emphasizes the role of supervisors for promoting and retaining employees. Human resource practices, such as job training, (financial) benefits, and development opportunities, have shown to affect employee performance and retention (e.g., Deckop, Konrad, Perlmutter, & Freely, 2006). Supervisors fulfill and complement these human resource management practices (Alfes et al., 2013; Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) by shaping employees’ perceptions of development opportunities in the organization (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012; Nishii & Wright, 2008). Our study adds to this existing knowledge by showing that supervisors who provide a broader group of employees with career mentoring create a career mentoring climate, which affects employees’ promotability and stay intentions in addition to their (individual) career motivation and job satisfaction. Hence, employees’ shared perceived investment in employee development (PIED; Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012) may be largely derived from supervisors’ general and consistent mentoring behaviors at work.

This study demonstrates that aspects of the work climate as represented by a career mentoring climate are apt to foster promotability. This is an important extension of previous research on promotability that primarily focused on individual experiences that influence promotability (De Pater et al., 2009; Greenhaus et al., 1990). In times when organizations cannot promise stable, long-term employment, their responsibility to facilitate employees’ employability increases (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007). It is therefore important to identify further contextual factors, such as an organization’s learning climate, which help organizations to develop the skills and adaptability of the entire workforce.

Notably, only the contextual effect of career mentoring climate, but not differentiated career mentoring, seems to foster promotability. This is an unexpected finding given that mentoring theory usually highlights that mentored employees have unique experiences that account for their career advantages (e.g., Allen et al., 2004). A possible explanation may be that when supervisors readily provide sponsorship, challenging assignments, and networking opportunities, many team members are encouraged to pursue challenges and to acquire new skills. Hence, although some employees may believe that they receive relatively less career mentoring, they may actually involve as much in developmental activities as their colleagues because of the general positive career supportive climate. Through engaging in challenging and developmental activities, employees in career mentoring climates show that they are willing and able to perform at higher levels (De Pater et al., 2009), which fosters their promotability as assessed by the supervisor.

For the intention to stay, we put forward two competing hypotheses based on findings showing that mentoring can aid as well as jeopardize retaining qualified employees. Our results support a positive influence of differentiated career mentoring via job satisfaction rather than a negative indirect effect via career motivation. In this respect, our research complements findings suggesting a positive relationship between mentoring and the intention to stay (Allen et al., 2004) by introducing job satisfaction as a crucial mediating mechanism.

It is important to note that our participants could assume to receive an offer of permanent employment after finishing their apprenticeship. Kraimer et al. (2011) showed that under such favorable career conditions, the intention to stay is increased by career support. However, when there is a lack of career opportunities, the intention to stay may decrease as employees may tend to seek career opportunities outside the organization. Potential career opportunities in the organization might therefore be an important moderator to take into account in future mentoring research.

Although not operating as a mediator, career motivation seems negatively related to the intention to stay. This result is in line with previous research (Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Nauta et al., 2009) suggesting that highly career motivated employees are likely to consider external job opportunities instead of pursuing lengthy intraorganizational career paths. The lack of mediation suggests that there are other drivers of career motivation, besides career mentoring, which may account for the negative relationship with the intention to stay. London (1983) proposed that personal characteristics such as need for achievement, internal locus of control, or openness to experience are determinants of career motivation and subsequently also affect turnover intention (Eby et al., 2003).

4.2 | Practical implications

This study has some practical implications for the career development and retention of employees. With regard to career development, the complexity of contemporary career paths and the more self-determined role of employees in shaping their careers urge changes in traditional organizational career development, which relied on predictable career paths and lifelong employment. In particular, scholars and practitioners have called for a new approach to organizational career development in order to develop a flexible and promotable workforce (Hite & McDonald, 2008; Ito & Brotheridge, 2005; Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007). Our results indicate that career mentoring provided by supervisors is an efficient instrument to deal with the requirements of contemporary organizational career management. Most importantly, a career mentoring climate seems to enhance the development, flexibility, and promotability of all employees.

Our findings are based on data from blue-collar workers. Researchers and organizations tend to ignore the career needs of blue-collar workers, and only a few of them may realize that the fulfillment of career needs may go beyond monetary rewards (Hennequin, 2007). Blue-collar workers generally receive less formal off-the-job training than other occupational groups (Osterman, 1995). However, these workers also need to stay promotable, as their work complexity increases constantly (Osterman, 1995). Mentoring can compensate for the lack of formal training, as it increases the promotability of blue-collar workers, prepares them for dealing with challenging job demands, and satisfies their career needs.
We found that intention to stay was most strongly related to job satisfaction and career mentoring climate. Hence, organizations that combine individual career mentoring with a high-quality career mentoring climate are able to retain their talented employees. As a career mentoring climate also related to promotability, this positive climate will promote maintaining talented employees in particular. HRM practices may tend to stress the timely selection of high potentials (e.g., by means of talent audits). However, this may implicitly signal that supervisors should direct their career-supporting efforts exclusively to these high potentials. Differentiated career mentoring can indeed be used as a special incentive for high-potential employees to increase their job satisfaction and tie them closer to the organization. At the same time, differentiated career mentoring may also signal an organization's low concern with the development of all other employees who do not experience career mentoring support from the supervisor, resulting in employees' lower actual development, job satisfaction, and stay intention. Hence, organizations could motivate supervisors to pursue a thoughtful combination of differentiated career mentoring and group-level career mentoring, which will enable the organization to develop and retain a larger part of their workforce.

The question is, how can organizations motivate supervisors to provide informal career mentoring to all rather than particular employees? First, as human resource management aims to initiate favorable social exchange processes between the employee and the organization (Alfes et al., 2013), organizations could facilitate “good” supervisor practices. In their communication, organizations could encourage supervisors to create high-quality mentoring climates by stressing that employees’ needs, personal growth, and well-being are as important as the organization’s business objectives. Furthermore, they could train supervisors to provide all their employees (rather than only some of them) with challenging tasks and networking opportunities in the organization and thereby to promote a career mentoring climate. Second, as a training may not always result in actual changes in supervisor behaviors or lead to the retention and transfer of knowledge in the longer term, organizations could apply methods to create actionable knowledge, that is, knowledge that allows supervisors “to make informed choices about important practical problems and to implement solutions to them effectively” (Cummings & Jones, 2003, p. 2) and “to practice, thereby improving their understanding and skills” (Rousseau, 2012). Such knowledge can be created by using, for example, a management development technique such as 360 feedback. Supervisors could collect data regarding their career mentoring behaviors from direct reports, peers, superiors, and self. This data can be the input for reflection, learning, intervention, additional training, and behavioral change. This data may, for example, reveal supervisors’ false beliefs (Rousseau, 2012) about (blue-collar) employees’ motivation to develop and learn. In addition, recollection of follow-up 360 feedback data will facilitate a management developmental cycle aligning managerial behaviors with organizational objectives (e.g., Green, 2002).

Finally, organizations could facilitate the building of career mentoring climates by developing HRM instruments that incorporate career mentoring conversations into the regular performance reviews that supervisors have with their employees. In addition, supervisors could learn how to make idiosyncratic deals (I-deals) with their employees (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). I-deals are “voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party” (Rousseau et al., 2006, p. 978). By making I-deals, supervisors show mentoring behaviors to all their employees (creating a mentoring climate) and, at the same time, differentiate among employees with regard to the content of these deals (differentiated career mentoring).

4.3 | Strengths, limitations, and future research

Our sample of vocational trainees was perfectly suited to explore how supervisors influence career development. Given that our participants had just started their careers, we trust that the observed relationships are driven by trainees’ mentoring perceptions and not by previous job experiences. A further strength of our study lies in our methodology. Our multilevel framework reveals the distinct routes of differentiated and group-level career mentoring in a group context. Using latent variable decomposition not only enables an adequate operationalization of differentiated and group-level mentoring (Enders & Tofghi, 2007) but also corrects for measurement bias (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2010).

Of course, as every study, our approach also has some potential limitations. In this respect, we acknowledge that a potential limitation of our sample is that our participants were quite young in comparison to the general workforce. We are, however, confident that our conclusions will also hold for an older population. First, from a theoretical perspective, career mentoring has been proposed to enable continuous learning across the (work) life span (Voelpel et al., 2012). Career mentoring also contributes to a stimulating work environment that allows employees to apply their skills, and this becomes more and more important with increasing age (Kooij et al., 2010). Second, our findings are consistent with empirical research on career mentoring, including samples of older employees (e.g., Day & Allen, 2004; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Sturges et al., 2005). Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so replication of our findings in an older sample would strengthen our reasoning.

Additionally, we acknowledge the possibility that common method bias might have inflated the correlations between the variables in the intention-to-stay model and to a lesser extent in the promotability model (with independent supervisor ratings). The self-report measures in this study were appropriate because we were interested in employees’ perceptions of career mentoring and their career motivation and stay intention. Our results show modest correlations among the self-report measures and different patterns of how career mentoring relates to the mediating and outcome variables, which indicate that a common source variable that systematically affects all model variables is less likely. While common method bias cannot be completely ruled out, we are confident that it may not be the primary driver of our results. However, we advise researchers to a priori address the possibility of CMV when using self-report measures in their future research. Shaver (2005) and Antonakis and colleagues (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010) recommend including instruments in a study. Instruments are exogenous variables that are correlated with the explanatory variable(s) but uncorrelated
with the error term in the regression equation (predicting the outcome variable). Identifying an instrument should be based on theory, which may be a challenge for future research designs. Another way to counter common method bias in future research is to examine relationships between (shared) career mentoring perceptions and actual behaviors, such as employee turnover.

Furthermore, future research could examine relationships between differentiated and group-level career mentoring and other outcome variables. As mentoring is conceived an important tool for an organization’s innovativeness and flexibility, future research could examine the role of differentiated and group-level career mentoring in enhancing employees’ involvement in innovation, openness to change, and actual adaptability. Moreover, future research could focus on investigating relationships between career mentoring climate and organizational outcomes. For example, due to its focus on learning and skill development, a career mentoring climate might be an important antecedent of organizational learning climate (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). Also, as career mentoring makes organizational career opportunities more accessible and offers instrumental assistance for career advancement, it likely enhances perceived organizational support, which is an important predictor of individual and organizational outcomes (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Hence, future research could study other mediating processes than the ones in the current study.

Because mentoring involves two types of support (Allen et al., 2004), that is, psychosocial and career support, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether differentiated psychosocial mentoring and differentiated career mentoring relate differently to specific mediating and outcome variables. In a similar vein, it would be interesting to study whether shared perceptions of psychosocial mentoring and shared perceptions of career mentoring relate differently to outcomes. Psychosocial mentoring mainly concerns the unique relationship between the supervisor and the employee rather than characterizing the organization (Allen et al., 2004; Baranik et al., 2010). However, psychosocial mentoring climates may nevertheless contribute to outcome variables such as organizational commitment and stay intentions, whereas it may less likely contribute to employee promotability.

An anonymous reviewer noted that mentoring climate may moderate the effect of differentiating mentoring. Indeed, research on frog-pond models (e.g., Jiang, Probst, & Benson, 2014) suggests that the evaluation of one’s relative standing within a group is moderated by the group’s overall performance. This theory is also applicable to career mentoring: In teams with highly favorably levels of career mentoring climate, differentiating mentoring may be less effective. In such settings, all group members are likely to feel well prepared for career development. In contrast, when career mentoring climate is rather unfavorable, the effect of differentiated career mentoring may be particularly pronounced. In this scenario, employees receiving more career mentoring may feel especially valued. In this study, we explored whether group-level mentoring moderated the effect of differentiating mentoring on the outcome variables but we could not find evidence of a moderating effect. Nevertheless, given the empirical support for the frog-pond model, we encourage researchers to further examine this phenomenon in the context of career mentoring by including a broad range of different career mentoring climates.

Finally, we acknowledge that our study design does not allow drawing conclusions about causality between variables. Although theory suggests a causal effect of mentoring on career outcomes, those employees with high career potential who actively pursue their personal career development might be especially prone to receiving career mentoring from their supervisors (Sturges et al., 2005). Indeed, testing alternative models revealed worse, but still satisfactory, fit indices for the reversed intention to stay model in our study. This may point to reciprocal and reinforcing relationships between career mentoring, career motivation, and job satisfaction. Importantly, however, promotability ratings by supervisors were collected about three months after the trainee survey, so that this time-lagged approach boosts our confidence in the directionality of these effects. Future longitudinal and experimental research can provide stronger indications for the causal effects of mentoring.

5 | CONCLUSION

Integrating the group context in mentoring research reveals that a career mentoring climate boosts employee promotability and stay intention above and beyond differentiated career mentoring. To optimally accommodate the requirements of contemporary organizational career development and to retain an adaptable workforce, human resource management policy and practices should facilitate supervisors to attend to the career needs of all rather than only some of their employees.

NOTES

1 Whereas unskilled cleaners usually have limited career options, there is a lack of qualified building cleaning professionals that deal with more complex requirements of facility management. This sample may be unique, but it is adequate for our research hypothesis.
2 We also measured psychosocial mentoring but do not include the data in this article because we expected (and found) group-level effects for career mentoring only. Readers who are interested in the psychosocial mentoring data can contact the authors.
3 Chan (1998) discussed different underlying models that are used to justify higher-level constructs. The most common composition models in climate research are the direct-consensus, which is based on the immediate respondent’s perception, and the referent-shift approach, which focuses on a more general, abstract referent. Van Mierlo, Vermunt, and Rutte (2009) argued that the differences between direct consensus and referent-shift approaches is practically irrelevant when the within- and between-level constructs do not represent independent, conceptually distinct constructs. In this study, the direct-consensus approach is appropriate because the higher order construct (career mentoring climate) is conceptually similar to its individual-level counterpart (career mentoring) and the perception of career mentoring is shared by individual group members.
4 As expected, testing a full model with the smaller sample revealed comparable relationships as in the separate models, but the fit indices were less optimal.


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