Chapter 6

Reflections on the Theoretical Approaches and Methodological Issues in Mentoring Relationships

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The previous three chapters have reviewed the theory and methods employed in youth mentoring, student–faculty mentoring, and workplace mentoring. Broadly examining these chapters reveals the aspects unique to and similar across each area of mentoring scholarship. Highlighting the common theoretical and methodological issues across chapters allows speculation about how the three areas of study may contribute to one another.

Unique Aspects

Workplace mentoring has generally been conceptualized as providing both career and psychosocial functions for protégés. However, the orientation in youth mentoring toward increasing the social, personal, and psychological support of the protégé (e.g., befriending the youth, helping the youth avoid trouble, promoting personal development, and serving as a source of support) suggests that psychosocial functions may be more important than career functions for youth mentoring relationships. In contrast, academic mentors provide integral direction for teaching, research, career advice, and advocacy for the protégé and may be relied upon less for psychosocial functions than career functions.

Mentors’ motives may also differentiate mentoring in these three types of relationships. Youth mentoring hinges on mentors volunteering time to children in need and making a difference in their community. Underlying this behavior may be a fundamental altruistic drive that is not as prevalent in other mentoring contexts. Although self-centered motivations for youth mentoring may exist, these relationships tend to be more other-focused, often fueled by the desire to help vulnerable youth. There may be relatively more self-focused mentor motives in student–faculty and workplace mentoring relationships. For example, a workplace or an academic
mentor may be motivated by the desire to fulfill others' expectations or enhance their own achievements. Academic administrators may expect faculty to mentor students, and managers may be expected to mentor high-potential employees in the organization. In either situation, mentors may initiate the relationship because of self-focused motives, such as the expectation that their own productivity and career success will be enhanced by cultivating mentoring relationships.

The intended impact of mentoring also varies across areas of study. Youth mentoring may have more far-reaching societal effects. Providing youths with opportunities for greater community involvement and personal growth may cause them to feel empowered and confident. Thus, mentoring may not only improve the lives of individual youths but also on a grander scale may achieve the implicit objective of mitigating rifts between social classes and improve society as a whole. The impact of academic mentoring is less grandiose but still potentially widespread. Success of the student–faculty mentorship can change an academic department's climate, and effective student–faculty mentorships may gradually impact the entire institution or profession. Workplace mentoring primarily affects the personal lives and careers of those involved, although it may also have broader ramifications for the entire organization (e.g., reduced employee withdrawal intentions, enhanced perceptions of fairness).

Similar Aspects

One of the overarching themes of this section is the acknowledgment that mentoring is a two-way street. The literature on youth mentoring emphasizes mutuality between participants; both parties must be willing to participate in the relationship and be open and responsive to the other person's needs. Student–faculty and workplace mentorships also center on the idea that mentoring is an exchange relationship between two people. Although few investigations of mentoring attempt to decipher the nature and development of this dyadic exchange, as discussed by Eby, Rhodes, and Allen (this volume) the existence of two people engaged in a "give and take" relationship is a basic tenet defining mentoring and differentiating it from other types of relationships.

Another notable similarity among the three types of mentoring relationships is the acknowledgment of mentoring as a developmental process. In youth mentoring, the mentor attempts to increase self-efficacy and competence by providing the youth with repeated opportunities for learning and accomplishment. Thus, the mentor develops the youth's self-concept over time by building a perception of acceptance and support from others and by facilitating development of an attainable self-concept. In student–faculty relationships, specific factors (e.g., establishing identity, managing emotions, developing integrity) have been proposed to understand student development. The literature on workplace mentoring has taken a more descriptive approach and proposes that mentoring relationships progress through specific temporal phases marked by unique developmental issues.

All three areas of study also warn against potentially negative outcomes of mentoring. Dysfunctional youth mentoring relationships occur when the youth perceives that the relationship is not important to the mentor, that s/he is viewed as incompetent by the mentor, or that the relationship has little potential for future personal growth. From a student's perspective, this can undermine the student's self-esteem and hinder their development.

Methodological Issues

Measuring any type of mentoring relationship is more complex than it appears. Definitions of mentoring vary widely, and researchers often choose to ignore one or more definitions in their analyses. This, in turn, may lead to results that are not generalizable to other settings.

While considering the need for more research on mentoring relationships, it is important to recognize the complexity of these relationships. However, by understanding the different types and complexities of mentoring, we can better support the development of effective mentoring programs.
growth. From a student–faculty context, mentorships may fail when mentors withhold guidance or skill enrichment opportunities, display incompetence in the mentor role, or lack empathy and authenticity when dealing with protégés. The possibility of mentoring problems is also discussed in workplace mentoring from the perspective of both mentor and protégé. As an illustration, protégés can behave deceptively toward mentors, and mentors can sabotage the success of protégés or ignore protégés’ developmental needs.

Methodological Issues

Measuring any type of mentoring relationship poses many challenges, and research in each of the three areas recommends both similar and unique approaches to overcoming these obstacles. Research in all three areas faces some difficulty conceptualizing and operationalizing mentoring as well as distinguishing it from other relationships such as coaching, advising, and role modeling (also see Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, this volume). The area of youth mentoring is perhaps least affected by this problem because most research focuses on formal mentorships, resulting in clearer definitions of “mentor” and “protégé.” Johnson et al. (this volume) reports that some researchers avoid this problem entirely by failing to define mentoring, allowing participants to use their own personal meaning of the term, while others define the term so specifically that it may cause important aspects of the relationship to be overlooked if they are not incorporated into the definition. Descriptions of mentoring that are too vague or too specific limit the generalizability of the study by creating results that are either too ambiguous or too constrained.

All three chapters also discuss how mentoring relationships are inherently dyadic and underscore the importance of collecting multi-source data. As noted by Scandura and Pellegrini (this volume), data may be biased if collected only from the protégé or the mentor. Thus, obtaining information from outside observers may provide a more objective perception of the relationship. Research in youth mentoring explicitly recognizes the need for alternative perspectives from parents, teachers, and case workers (see Keller, this volume). Program directors who observe student–faculty mentorships may also provide important insight into academic mentorships. Little discussion of alternative sources exists in workplace mentoring contexts but may include ratings provided by supervisors and/or colleagues who are familiar with the mentorship.

Assessing mentorships over time is also discussed as vital to understanding mentoring relationships. All three areas appropriately cite the need for more longitudinal designs, which would be useful for the generation of comprehensive theories relevant to mentoring relationships. While each area has its own perspective of mentorship development, a more global description of the process may contribute to the richness of general theory about how mentorships change over time.

New Horizons in the Field of Mentoring

While considering theoretical and methodological development in these three areas of mentoring scholarship, it is important to identify emerging research areas. First, future research should account for the impact of technological advances that may limit the amount of face-to-face interaction between mentor and protégé (e.g.,
distance learning, flexitime, e-mail, and telework). Second, because individuals are embedded in multiple social relationships simultaneously and over time, a topic of theoretical interest may be how the presence of multiple mentors influences a person across the lifespan. Lastly, while some work has been done on problems in mentoring relationships, there is still much to learn about the negative aspects of mentoring and how one may overcome, or even learn from, such setbacks. Future theoretical and methodological advances in these areas would contribute to the quality and understanding of mentoring relationships across areas of study.