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Moving Toward Interdisciplinary Dialogue in Mentoring Scholarship: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

The study of mentoring spans a wide range of disciplines including psychology, organizational behavior, education, and social work, among others. However, until recently there has been little interdisciplinary dialogue among mentoring scholars. In this Special Issue we attempt to lay the groundwork for interdisciplinary research on mentoring by examining this phenomenon through the lens of youth mentoring, academic mentoring, and workplace mentoring. In this introduction we outline the aims of this Special Issue, provide a common definition of mentoring to guide the reader through the articles that follow, summarize the knowledge gained from the included articles, and offer insight into what we believe are important next steps for developing a multidisciplinary perspective on mentoring.

Mentoring relationships are ubiquitous; they exist between youth and unrelated adults, peers, students and faculty, and organizational members. These relationships take many forms. Some mentoring relationships develop spontaneously between two individuals whereas others originate in formal mentoring programs in community settings, on college campuses, or within organizations (Allen & Eby, 2007b). Mentoring research and practice has developed through the work of a multidisciplinary community of scholars, each focusing on a specific population or mentoring target. Researchers with disciplinary backgrounds in community and/or developmental psychology, sociology, and social work tend to study youth mentoring relationships. Researchers with disciplinary roots in education and counseling psychology investigate mentoring relationships within academic settings. Organizational psychologists and management researchers tend to focus on workplace mentoring. Thus, within the mentoring literature, the population of focus (e.g., youth, college student, employee) is intertwined with disciplinary perspective. This is shown in Figure 1, which also illustrates that there is little disciplinary overlap in the study of different target populations. Mentoring research has developed firm foundations within disciplines and target populations. The aim of the Special Issue is to facilitate a shift from a multidisciplinary approach, where two or more disciplines examine the same problem but with limited integration, to an interdisciplinary perspective characterized by assimilation and borrowing of ideas, concepts and methods across disciplines.

The aim of this Special Issue is to introduce readers to original empirical research on various mentoring targets, including mentoring that occurs in community settings, academic settings, and organizational settings. The articles contained in this issue focus on mentoring across the lifespan – ranging from youth mentoring (Rhodes, Lowe, Litchfield, & Walsh-Samp), to the

mentoring of young adults in college settings (Smith-Jentsch, Scielzo, Singelton, & Rosopa), to mentoring relationships between individuals after they enter the workforce (Gentry, Weber, & Sadri; Parise & Forret). In addition, three articles in the Special Issue examine mentoring in multiple contexts and/or during more than one developmental period (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois; Higgins, Dobrow, & Chandler; Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral). Taken as a whole these articles offer new ideas regarding theories and methods that can be applied to the study of mentoring relationships across disciplinary boundaries.

Mentoring Scholarship: Where Have We Been?

There are some differences of opinion about what constitutes a mentoring relationship both *within* and *across* disciplines. However, it is possible to identify several defining features of mentoring. First, it is a dyadic relationship between a more experienced person (a mentor) and a less experienced person (a protégé). Second, the relationship is reciprocal, yet asymmetrical. Although both mentor and protégé may benefit, the primary goal of a mentorship is the growth and development of the protégé. Third, mentoring relationships are dynamic. The relational processes and outcomes associated with mentoring change over time. Finally, mentors are distinct from other potentially influential people such as role models, advisors, teachers, supervisors and coaches (Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2007).

Although different areas of mentoring scholarship have some unique origins, several influential scholarly works were fundamental in shaping the field of mentoring. Levinson's comprehensive examination of the developmental trajectory of 40 men provided early insight into the important role that mentors can play in individuals' lives (Levinson, Darrow, Levinson, Klein, & McKee, 1978). Merriam's (1983) review of mentoring in adult development, business and academic settings also helped codify mentoring by illustrating similarities and differences across various conceptualizations of mentoring. From the field of sociology, Williams and Kornblum's (1985) study of 900 low-income urban youth identified mentors as extremely important in predicting positive outcomes for youth. Finally, Kram's (1985) seminal qualitative research on organizational mentoring became an important anchor for much of the subsequent research on mentoring.

The study of mentoring has followed a rather predictable path. Because mentoring relationships are oriented toward helping the protégé, most research examines mentoring from the perspective of the protégé and does so at the individual level of analysis (see Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Johnson, 2007). Both naturally occurring (informal) and third-party assigned (formal) mentoring relationships have been investigated, although formal mentoring is studied more often in youth mentoring (Spencer, 2007) whereas workplace mentoring has historically focused more on informal mentoring (Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). Finally, as a power- and resource-based relationship (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1990), considerable attention has been placed on how mentoring can be utilized to help those with less social power and with fewer resources (e.g., women, racial minorities, at-risk youth) overcome obstacles and achieve success.

In terms of content areas of interest, a wide range of outcomes have been examined. Mentoring is discussed as a strategy to reduce risky youth behavior (e.g., drug use, gang activity) and promote positive youth development, as a way to help students successfully transition into college, and as a technique to help employees develop, both personally and professionally (Allen & Eby, 2007b). Therefore, a considerable body of research, regardless of when or where the mentoring relationship occurs, involves identifying protégé outcomes associated with mentoring. Another topic of shared interest involves identifying the antecedents of mentoring. This includes investigating the predictors of access to mentoring as well as research designed to understand what predicts the amount of mentoring received by protégés. Common categories

of predictors across mentoring targets include protégé socio-demographic characteristics, protégé personality and other individual differences, as well as structural (e.g., formality) and affective (e.g., liking) attributes of the mentoring relationship (for a review see Allen & Eby, 2007b). Studies examining the relational and behavioral processes responsible for the positive effects of mentoring are also found across youth, academic and workplace mentoring, as are studies evaluating the effectiveness of formal mentoring initiatives (for a review see Allen & Eby, 2007b).

In an effort to move the field of mentoring scholarship forward, a little over a decade ago the Journal of Vocational Behavior published a Special Issue on mentoring. That 1997 Special Issue focused on new directions in workplace mentoring research and included empirical and conceptual articles that examined some of the underlying assumptions of mentoring relationships (e.g., mentoring phases; Chao, 1997), identified the importance of examining both mentor and protégé perspectives on mentoring (e.g., Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997), and explored how changes in the world of work relate to mentoring processes and outcomes (e.g., alternative forms of mentoring; Eby, 1997; diversified mentoring relationships; Ragins, 1997). The 1997 Special Issue had a positive impact on the study of workplace mentoring, leading to important extensions in our thinking. The individual articles that appeared in the Special Issue have been widely cited and have inspired subsequent programs of research.

Interestingly, the editors of the 1997 Special Issue discussed how mentoring exists in other settings and with populations other than employees, noting that "...future research on mentoring should integrate findings from various settings...to extend our knowledge of mentoring relationships" (Russell & Adams, 1997, p. 11). A decade later, the stage is set for such paradigm shifting research. It is time to move out of our own disciplinary silos and capitalize on the decades of mentoring scholarship that exists in other disciplines.

Importance of Interdisciplinary Research on Mentoring

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and research teams have become widespread and are the new standard within the scientific community (National Academy of Sciences, 2005). Multidisciplinary research involves the joining together of two or more disciplines with expertise to solve a problem, but with limited integration. That is, each discipline makes a separate contribution. Interdisciplinary research is characterized by synergy and integration of knowledge, concepts, tools, and theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge (Cacioppo, 2007; National Academy of Sciences, 2005). Major government funding agencies such as National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF) have begun to emphasize the importance of forming multi- and interdisciplinary research teams as part of the funding process and many universities are developing research centers and departmental programs that are specifically constructed to foster interdisciplinary research and training.

The movement toward multidisciplinary is driven by the benefits of such collaboration. Many of the significant research advancements of the recent past, such as the Manhattan Project, discovery of the structure of DNA, and human genome sequencing, have been based on interdisciplinary work (National Academy of Sciences, 2005). Interdisciplinary collaboration is powerful in that it provides a format for conversations and connections that generate new knowledge as research questions and foci become sharpened (National Academy of Science, 2005). As a consequence, new ways of thinking are stimulated, generating new insights, approaches and solutions to pressing problems (Rhoton & Parker, 2004).

We encouraged the authors of each of the articles within the Special Issue to provide integrative insights that transcended their own disciplinary boundaries and focus of mentoring research.

Such work is challenging as it requires additional time be devoted to reading and becoming familiar with work outside one's own specialty. However, the potential rewards are rich in that complex real world problems that mentoring aims to address such as persistent disparities across gender and race in terms career opportunity, disconnected and disenfranchised youth, and higher education access and success, are those that require solutions that traverse disciplinary lines. Each of the authors met the challenge, thus laying the groundwork for future collaboration and broader understanding of mentoring relationships across the lifespan. As the articles selected for the Special Issue illustrate there are patterns of mutual relatedness and connection across the unique target populations of mentoring study.

Articles Represented in the Special Issue

The Special Issue opens with an in-depth qualitative study by Liang, Spencer, Brogan and Corral focusing on the relational processes that are viewed as important by protégés across the developmental states of early adolescence, middle adolescence, and emerging adulthood. By focusing on naturally occurring mentoring relationships, Liang and colleagues provide the first comparative analysis of protégés at different early developmental stages. Their findings offer important insight into mentor characteristics that protégés find important, behavioral and affective relational processes that facilitate mentorship effectiveness, and important outcomes from the protégé perspective. Liang and colleagues also identify commonalities across developmental stages (e.g., importance of trust and role modeling) as well as key differences by developmental stage (e.g., younger protégés tend to idealize mentors whereas older protégés appreciate the opportunity to see mentors learn from their struggles). This study reminds us of the dynamic nature of mentoring relationships and points out how protégé maturity plays an important role in understanding mentoring relationships.

The second paper, by Rhodes, Lowe, Litchfield, and Walsh-Samp, also examines relational processes in mentoring, this time focusing on the role of gender in formal youth mentoring relationships. Drawing from the workplace and student-faculty literature on mentoring, as well as the more general literature on gender differences, Rhodes and colleagues propose that male and female protégés are likely to enter mentoring relationships with different needs and that this in turn influences how long the mentorship lasts as well as how the protégé reacts to premature termination of the mentorship. This study finds that young female protégés tend to enter mentorships with a history of more troubled interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, girls' mentoring relationships lasted significantly longer than did boys' relationships, and girls' satisfaction with the mentorship was more negatively affected when the relationship ended prematurely. In addition to adding to the literature on gender and mentoring, Rhodes et al's study suggests some unique issues are involved in mentoring female protégés and highlights the importance of social connectedness in female protégés' mentoring relationships.

Smith-Jentsch, Scielzo, Singelton, and Rosopa take a different perspective on the influence of gender in mentoring relationships. These authors explore the relative effectiveness of face-to-face versus electronic communication in peer mentoring relationships among college students, examining mentor gender as a moderator of the communication medium-protégé outcome relationship. Similar to the two previously discussed studies, Smith-Jentsch and colleagues investigate relational processes in mentoring; this time focusing on communication and dialogue interactivity. Supporting the importance of personal contact between mentor and protégé, they found higher rates of mentoring behavior in the face-to-face condition when using an objective measure of communication, mentor reports of mentoring provided, and protégé reports of mentoring received. Electronic mentoring appears to have another drawback when the mentor is male. Protégés interacting electronically with a male mentor reported the least amount of mentoring received. Interestingly, no such differences were found in terms of mentors' reports of mentoring provided. The nature of the communication also varied across

face-to-face and electronic mentoring. Perhaps due to less social apprehension, greater dialogue interactivity occurred in the electronic chat condition. In turn, dialogue interactivity predicted greater self-efficacy among those in the electronic mentoring condition. With the increased popularity of e-mentoring initiatives across all types of mentoring relationships, this study provides important information on the trade-offs associated with these mentoring schemes and suggests that mentor gender may be important to consider when implementing such programs. Moreover, this study illustrates the usefulness of drawing from communication theory and research to inform mentoring research.

Integrating research on workplace mentoring, education, and social psychology, Higgins, Dobrow and Chandler examine how developmental relationships that originate in college influence subsequent career development. Using a longitudinal design that followed individuals for ten years, these authors found the overall amount of mentoring support received from one's entire developmental network predicted career-related self-efficacy and perceived career success. However, maintaining connections with peer developers from graduate school also had some negative career consequences. Those who continued to receive support from graduate school peers actually reported feeling less successful in their own careers. The authors interpret this finding in light of research on the negative effects of upward comparison processes (Willis, 1981). In this case comparing one's own success to peers from graduate school may make salient areas in which the protégé has been less successful him or her self. In this study we see how various sources of mentoring support can influence protégé development. We also gain an appreciation of the complexity of network ties by finding both positive and negative consequences for protégés, depending on the type of developer.

Also focusing on the positive and negative aspects of mentoring, Parise and Forret examine how various attributes of a formal mentoring program relate to mentors' perceptions of the costs and benefits of participation in an organization-based program. These authors found that the program characteristic of voluntary participation in the mentoring program was particularly important in reducing the perceived costs of participation and increasing the perceived benefits as reported by mentors. They also found that management support related to favorable mentor reactions to the formal mentoring program. Surprisingly, having input into the matching process was not related to perceived benefits. This study adds to the mentoring literature on formal mentoring program design by identifying several key aspects of mentoring programs that relate to perceptions of benefits and costs to participating in formal programs from the perspective of the mentor. Because any formal mentoring program cannot remain afloat without individuals who are willing to serve as mentors, Parise and Forret's research has potential implications for formal mentoring programs targeting youth, students, and employees.

Building on the idea that mentoring can reap benefits for mentors, Gentry, Weber and Sadri examine how protégé ratings of mentoring received relates to mentor performance, as rated by the mentor's boss. They also examine mentor cultural background as a cross-level moderator of the mentoring provided-mentor performance relationship. Couched within a multi-source developmental feedback context, Gentry and colleagues find that the provision of more mentoring by mentors (as reported by protégés) positively relates to ratings of the mentor's performance by his or her boss. Making this important link between mentoring provided and mentor performance further substantiates that mentoring others can be beneficial not just for protégés, but also for mentors. These authors also found that in performance-oriented cultures this relationship was particularly strong. Although there are increasing numbers of immigrant children, culturally and ethnically diverse college students, and an increasingly diverse workforce that may benefit from mentoring, there have been few studies to date that have examined cross-cultural issues in mentoring. Therefore, the Gentry et al study provides an

important contribution to the literature through its examination of the interplay between culture and mentoring.

The Special Issue closes with a comprehensive multidisciplinary meta-analysis of the outcomes associated with mentoring. In this quantitative review of the mentoring literature Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, and DuBois summarize the effect sizes associated with being mentored in terms of protégé behavioral, attitudinal, health-related, relational, motivational, and career outcomes. The authors find that while mentoring is significantly related to protégé outcomes, the effect sizes are generally small. By conducting sub-group analyses Eby and colleagues demonstrate that some types of mentoring display stronger relationships with outcomes than do others. For example, academic (student-faculty) mentoring is more strongly associated with protégé performance than is youth or workplace mentoring. This meta-analysis helps us reach some general conclusions about the breadth of outcomes associated with mentoring and estimates how much of an outcome gain we might expect as a consequence of mentoring. This study also identifies unique aspects of mentoring for various targets by finding some significant differences in the mentoring-outcome relationship across youth, academic, and workplace relationships.

A notable feature of the articles included in the Special Issue is their methodological diversity. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are represented as are both laboratory and field studies. We are particularly excited to see researchers using a wide range of methods since workplace and educational mentoring research has typically relied on cross-sectional, survey-based approaches, which has numerous limitations (Johnson, Rose, & Schlosser, 2007; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2007). Here again there is a tendency for certain research designs to be used with specific targets of mentoring study, and this is likely reflective of disciplinary emphasis. For example, industrial/organizational psychology tends to study mentoring from a quantitative rather than qualitative methodological approach and typically employs cross-sectional survey-based designs (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, in press). In contrast, youth mentoring which often originates in clinical psychology, community psychology or social work often uses experimental or quasi-experimental designs where mentored individuals are compared to non-mentored (control group) individuals (see DuBois et al., 2002). Cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration can foster a more cohesive triangulation of methodologies used to study mentoring. This seems important in that a recent methodological critique strongly recommends the diversification of methodological approaches to the study of mentoring in order to enhance our understanding of this complex social phenomenon (Allen et al., in press).

Pushing the Mentoring Envelope: Where Should We Go from Here?

Using the articles contained in the Special Issue as a backdrop allows us to offer some suggestions for approaching mentoring from an interdisciplinary perspective. In doing so we highlight theories that have been generated from a broad range of disciplines, including those not traditionally involved in mentoring research that we believe have applicability to the study of all types of mentoring relationships.

The research included in this Special Issue helps to further underscore that mentoring is associated with a wide range of mostly positive outcomes for mentors (Gentry et al.; Parise & Forret) and for protégés (Eby et al.; Higgins et al.) across the lifespan. Allen and Eby (2007a) provide one explanation for the positive effects of mentoring by suggesting that these relationships help fulfill an individual's "need to belong" – the desire to develop and sustain positive interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This meta-theory grew out of an intersection of personality theory, attachment theory, motivation theory and social psychology. The belongingness need is proposed to be a universal need that exists across the

lifespan and may be one reason why regardless of the developmental stage (youth, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood) mentoring can be an important relational experience for mentors and protégés alike. Social capital theory (for a review see Adler & Kwon, 2002) provides another lens by which to examine how mentoring may meet individuals' belongingness needs by highlighting the vast array of positive outcomes associated with being socially connected in various life spheres. Liang et al.'s in-depth qualitative study of mentoring pinpoints specific ways that the need to belong might be met in mentoring relationships; by engaging in fun experiences with the mentor, developing an emotional bond based on fidelity and trust, and psychologically identifying with a mentor. Research on workplace and academic mentoring has not focused so squarely on the mechanisms by which mentoring may meet belongingness needs. Application of Liang et al.'s findings to other targets of mentoring (e.g., employees) could be an excellent starting point in the development of efforts to unpack how and why mentoring relationships may meet individuals' need to belong.

Given that mentoring experiences exist across the lifespan research is also needed that examines how sequential and concurrent mentoring relationships, both within and across developmental stages, shape personal, social, academic, and professional outcomes for both protégés and mentors. Such efforts should draw upon theory and research across areas of mentoring scholarship to understand how early experiences as a youth protégé influence subsequent experiences as an adolescent protégé, as well as decisions to mentor others in adulthood. Allen and Eby (2007a) discuss this developmental element of mentoring, noting that at various life stages individuals may become involved in mentoring relationships, and each experience is likely to influence future decisions to enter such relationships. Several theoretical frameworks may be particularly useful in understanding patterns of mentoring experiences across the lifespan including Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development, Chickerling's (1969) vector model of development, and Erickson's (1963) developmental stage theory. Common to all of these theories is the notion that individuals face unique challenges at various life stages and can draw upon social resources to help them effectively navigate these developmental challenges. The study by Higgins and colleagues makes inroads here by focusing on multiple developmental relationships spanning a 10 year timeframe, as does the study by Liang et al. by examining developmental differences in mentoring processes for youth and adolescents. Moreover, the Eby et al. meta-analysis provides a broad perspective on protégé outcomes associated with mentoring across the lifespan.

Several articles included in this Special Issue also examine the role of gender in mentoring relationships. We know that men and women respond differently to helping in general (Eagly & Crowley, 1986) and to relationships more specifically (Canary & Dindia, 1998). These gender differences appear early in life and are sustained through adulthood (Eby, 2006). This means that research on mentoring, regardless of the when and where the relationship occurs, could be informed by the role that gender and gender-role identification may play in predicting the affective and behavioral processes in mentoring relationships. Gender may influence what protégés bring into mentoring relationships (see Rhodes et al.), what protégés get out of mentoring relationships (Smith-Jentsch et al.), and who is selected as a mentor (see Liang et al.). Although gender has been extensively examined in youth (Liang & Grossman, 2007) and in workplace mentoring (Ragins, 2007), research on youth mentoring tends to focus on gender differences in the meaning and importance of relationships whereas workplace mentoring often discusses power and resource differences between the genders as it relates to the importance of mentoring for women. Integrative research outlining how mentor and protégé gender influence relationship initiation, development, and the consequences of mentoring is another area for future multidisciplinary research. Feminist scholarship provides integrative ideas about the role of gender in mentoring. For example, Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1976) focuses on the processes and outcomes associated with high quality interpersonal relationships. Moreover, this theory situates close relationships in the broader and gendered

socio-cultural context to highlight how relationships may have different meanings and serve different purposes for men and women (see Fletcher & Ragins, 2007 for an application to workplace mentoring).

Finally, consistent with the emerging literature on the negative aspects of mentoring in educational, clinical, and organizational contexts (for a review see Eby, 2007) several of the articles contained in the Special Issue call into question the underlying assumption that mentoring is always a positive developmental experience. Specifically, mentoring may have some negative unintended consequences for young girls (Rhodes et al.), mentors in formal workplace programs (Parise & Forreth), and young adults making the transition from college to the world of work (Higgins et al.). Understanding relational problems in mentoring is an area that could benefit greatly from a multidisciplinary perspective since regardless of when in the lifespan the relationship occurs (e.g., youth, young adulthood) misunderstandings, conflicts, and disappointments can happen. Moreover, just like other close relationships, some relationships will recover and perhaps grow stronger after such setbacks whereas others will decline and eventually dissolve. Social psychology offers a wealth of theory and research on close relationships that could be used as a theoretical bridge in interdisciplinary research on problems in mentoring. Rusbult's (1980) Investment Model, which focuses on the costs and benefits in close relationships, and how these exchanges influence commitment, satisfaction, and stability, seems highly applicable to mentoring across the lifespan. So too does Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1989), with its emphasis on how early close relationships create working models of how to act and what to expect in close relationships throughout life. In addition, both of these theories provide insight into both the positive and negative aspects of mentoring relationships.

In closing, this Special Issue highlights the rich research potential of moving toward an interdisciplinary perspective on mentoring by attempting to integrate research and theory across areas of scholarship that are typically self-contained (see Figure 1). Progress in the area of mentoring research can be made with greater unification rather than fragmentation of knowledge. There are hundreds of published articles focusing on mentoring relationships across various disciplines. As such, there is much to be learned through interdisciplinary integration. While taking such an approach can be difficult and even risky, we believe that those who adopt such an approach will be more effective at accelerating our knowledge of mentoring. With this in mind, it is our hope that this Special Issue serves as a catalyst that sparks creative, integrative research across boundaries of mentoring scholarship.

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Disciplinary Focus	Mentoring Population		
	Youth	Student	Employee
Management			✓
Industrial/Organizational Psychology			✓
Women's Studies		✓	✓
Developmental Psychology	✓		✓
Sociology	✓		
Clinical Psychology	✓	✓	
Community Psychology	✓		
Social Work	✓		
Education	✓	✓	

Figure 1.
The Intersection of Disciplines and Mentoring Population of Focus