

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.

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1. Introduction

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,

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Table 1
The intersection of disciplines and mentoring population of focus

Disciplinary focus	Mentoring population		
	Youth	Student	Employee
Management			✓
Industrial/organizational psychology			✓
Women's studies		✓	✓
Developmental psychology	✓		✓
Sociology	✓		
Clinical psychology	✓	✓	
Community psychology	✓		
Social work	✓		
Education	✓	✓	

employee) is intertwined with disciplinary perspective. This is shown in Table 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.

2. 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

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