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Barry Bozeman and Mary K. Feeney  
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# Toward a Useful Theory of Mentoring

## A Conceptual Analysis and Critique

Barry Bozeman

Mary K. Feeney

*University of Georgia, Athens*

In this review and critique of mentoring theory and research, the authors identify persistent problems in the development of mentoring theory. Their conceptual analysis highlights these problems with a “thought experiment” illustrating the inability of mentoring theory and research to resolve certain fundamental issues, the resolution of which is a prerequisite for the advancement of explanatory theory. They conclude with ideas about demarcating “mentoring” from the sometimes confounding concepts “training” or “socialization.” Absent an ability to distinguish mentoring from related activities, progress in explanatory theory will remain impeded.

**Keywords:** *mentor; mentoring theory; group mentoring; formal mentoring*

**W**hy is there so often so little correspondence between potential social utility of a topic and theory development for that topic? One of the answers seems clear enough—in some instances, it is the very depth and the sweep of phenomena that ties us up in knots. Such crucial but opaque topics such as freedom (Friedman, 1962; Sen, 2002), public interest (Goodin, 1996), or happiness and quality of life (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Lane, 2000) pose special problems; the very bedrock nature of these topics thwarts progress.

More puzzling is a lack of explanatory progress on topics where the phenomenon of interest, although obviously important, is more commonplace and apparently observable. We nominate *mentoring* as an outstanding illustration of limited progress in theory for a topic that is obviously important and amenable to convenient measurement. Mentoring research adds up to less than the sum of its parts; although there is incremental progress in a variety of new and relevant subject domains, there has been too little attention to core concepts and theory.

If mentoring theory disappoints, it is not for a lack of scholarly attention or a deficit of published research. By one accounting (J. Allen & Johnston, 1997), more than 500 articles on mentoring were published in management and education literatures during the 10 years leading up to 1997. To some extent, the limited progress in mentoring theory seems attributable to a focus on the instrumental to the neglect of the explanatory. As Russell and Adams (1997) note, critics of mentoring research have lamented the absence of theory-driven research. Mentoring research tends to be based on “one off” studies based on limited samples and with a greater focus on correlations than careful causal explanation. In the rush to consider such obviously important issues as the nature of effective mentoring, the benefits of mentoring, and the impacts of mentoring on women and minority careers, there is all too often impatience with troublesome conceptual and analytical problems.

Our article reviews and criticizes mentoring theory, focusing particularly on conceptual bases of theoretical problems. We seek to demonstrate that despite the publications of hundreds of studies of mentoring, many of the findings are less useful than one might hope because fundamental, conceptual, and theoretical issues have been skirted. Findings are abundant but explanations are not. The device used to demonstrate this point is a simple thought experiment of a putative mentoring relationship. The thought experiment demonstrates the difficulty of using existing research and theory to answer fundamental questions about mentoring.

### **A More Useful Theory of Mentoring: What Is Missing?**

From one perspective, mentoring theory could hardly be more useful. Many researchers focus explicitly on the ways in which individual careers can benefit from mentoring (T. D. Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Dirsmith & Covalleski, 1985; Fagenson, 1989; Godshalk & Sosik, 2003; Noe, 1988), including women (Burke & McKeen, 1996, 1997; Ragins, 1989; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989; Scandura & Ragins, 1993) and minorities (Ragins, 1997a, 1997b; Thomas, 1990). Others focus on the organization and develop ideas or findings aimed at improving organizational performance (Payne & Huffman, 2005; Singh, Bains, & Vinnicombe, 2002; Wilson & Elman, 1990). Thus, mentoring research and theory are useful in the sense that they aim to provide practical findings relevant to individual and social needs.

What most philosophers of science (e.g., Hacking, 1983; Laudan, 1981) mean by a “useful” theory is one that has explanatory depth and breadth,

apart from its immediate social utility. Many (e.g., Carr, 1981; Gigerenzer, 1991) assume that practical utility flows directly, if not immediately, from explanatory breadth. But regardless of the time sequence, the key to cumulative knowledge is not accumulated findings but explanation (Kitcher, 1993).

Despite its having provided a wide array of valid and useful research findings, conceptual problems have impeded the mentoring studies' ability to provide compelling middle-range or broad-range theoretical explanations. As Burke and McKeen (1997) note, "Research on mentoring has typically lacked an integrated research model or framework . . . and most research findings are merely listings of empirical results" (p. 44).

## Defining Mentoring

Carl Hempel (1952) suggests that "to determine the meaning of an expression . . . one would have to ascertain the conditions under which the members of the community use—or, better, are disposed to use—the expression in question" (p. 9). Often the concepts presented are suggestive, identifying the attributes of mentoring rather than stipulating the meaning of the concept itself and, in particular, its boundary conditions. More than a few researchers fail to even provide a definition of mentoring (e.g., J. Allen & Johnston, 1997; Burke & McKeen, 1997; Chao, 1997; Collins & Scott, 1978; Green & Bauer, 1995; Tepper & Taylor, 2003).

The few formal, stipulative definitions provided in the mentoring literature sometimes do not have the coverage or plasticity required for research to move easily to new topics. We suggest that many of the current problems in conceptualizing mentoring and, consequently, developing theory, stem from an inattention to the conceptual needs of a growing field of study. Conceptual development of mentoring has for some time been stunted. Concepts and, thus, theory seem held hostage to early precedent.

Its contemporary popularity notwithstanding, serious research on mentoring began relatively recently (e.g., Kram, 1980; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Although it is impossible to identify a single work and say categorically that it is the beginning of mentoring research, one can make a good argument that Kathy Kram's (1980) dissertation and her 1983 *Academy of Management Journal* article provided a beginning to the contemporary research tradition. The 1983 article is still the most frequently cited journal article on the topic of mentoring, and her conceptualization of mentoring has been either directly quoted or reworked only slightly in many subsequent studies. In her seminal article, Kram identified four stages of mentoring but at no point provided an exacting definition.

In a subsequent book, Kram (1985) noted that mentoring involves an intense relationship whereby a senior or more experienced person (the mentor) provides two functions for a junior person (the protégé), one function being advice or modeling about career development behaviors and the second function being personal support, especially psychosocial support.

The early, relatively imprecise Kram conceptualization of mentoring has influenced subsequent work to a considerable extent. Although the early definition (or, more accurately, the early discussion) of the term was entirely suitable for the topic's 1980s level of explanatory and empirical development, subsequent application and conceptual stunting is more troubling.

Eby (1997) provides an appropriation of the Kram conceptualization that is quite typical:

Mentoring is an intense developmental relationship whereby advice, counseling, and developmental opportunities are provided to a protégé by a mentor, which, in turn, shapes the protégé's career experiences. . . . This occurs through two types of support to protégés: (1) instrumental or career support and (2) psychological support. (p. 126)

Other researchers (Chao, 1997; Ragins, 1997b) use close variants of this definition. To be sure, there has been a great deal of refinement and articulation of mentoring concepts and measures. However, as we see in Table 1, most of the branches connect to the same conceptual taproot. For example, Eby expands the Kram (1985) conceptualization to the idea of peer mentoring, moving away from the original focus on the mentor–protégé dyad. Whitely, Dougherty, and Dreher (1991) distinguish between “primary mentoring” (i.e., more intense and longer duration) and more ephemeral “secondary mentoring” but still beginning with the Kram conceptualization. Chao, Walz, and Gardner (1992) use Kram's conceptualization in connection with both formal and informal mentoring. Ragins (1997b) examines diversity and power relations, beginning with the Kram conceptualization. Scandura (1992) examines a number of questionnaire items, factor analyzing them and interpreting the results in terms of the dimensions initially suggested by Kram.

Perhaps one reason why early, somewhat imprecise concepts continue to hold sway is, ironically, the fragmentation of the literature. Early mentoring concepts seem to be the only glue holding together highly diverse research. Still, there have been some extensions and departures in conceptualization. For example, researchers now address the possible negative outcomes of mentoring, where barriers prevent mentors from providing

**Table 1**  
**Mentoring Definitions**

- 
- “Mentoring is defined as a developmental relationship that involves organizational members of unequal status or, less frequently, peers” (Bozionelos, 2004, p. 25).
- “Mentoring is an intense long-term relationship between a senior, more experienced individual (the mentor) and a more junior, less experienced individual (the protégé)” (Eby & Allen, 2002, p. 456).
- “Mentors provide young adults with career-enhancing functions, such as sponsorship, coaching, facilitating exposure and visibility, and offering challenging work or protection, all of which help the younger person to establish a role in the organization, learn the ropes, and prepare for advancement” (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 111).
- “Mentoring is a developmental relationship typically occurring between senior and junior individuals in organizations” (McManus & Russell, 1997, p. 145).
- “The mentor is usually a senior, experienced employee who serves as a role model, provides support, direction, and feedback to the younger employee regarding career plans and interpersonal development, and increases the visibility of the protégé to decision-makers in the organization who may influence career opportunities” (Noe, 1988, p. 458).
- “Traditionally, mentors are defined as individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and support to protégés careers” (Ragins, 1997b, p. 484).
- “A mentor is generally defined as a higher-ranking, influential individual in your work environment who has advanced experience and knowledge and is committed to providing upward mobility and support to your career. Your mentor may or may not be in your organization and s/he may or may not be your immediate supervisor” (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000, p. 1182).
- “We conceptualized supervisory mentoring as a transformational activity involving a mutual commitment by mentor and protégé to the latter’s long-term development, as a personal, extra organizational investment in the protégé by the mentor, and as the changing of the protégé by the mentor, accomplished by the sharing of values, knowledge, experience, and so forth” (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994, p. 1589).
- “We define mentors as ‘individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward support and mobility to their protégés’ careers” (Singh, Bains, & Vinnicombe, 2002, p. 391).
- “The term ‘mentor’ refers to a more senior person who takes an interest in sponsorship of the career of a more junior person” (Smith, Howard, & Harrington, 2005, p. 33).
- “Mentoring relationships facilitate junior colleagues’ (protégés) professional development and career progress” (Tepper, 1995, p. 1191).
- “This study focuses on a more formal type of relationship between a senior member of an organization and a novice, in part, to address the growing emphasis organizations are placing on formal types of mentoring in the socialization and career development of many professionals” (Young & Perrewe, 2000, p. 613).
- “A mentor is a person who oversees the career and development of another person, usually junior, through teaching, counseling, providing psychological support, protecting, and at times promoting or sponsoring. The mentor may perform any or all of the above functions during the mentor relationship” (Zey, 1984, p. 7).
-

guidance to protégés (Eby & Allen, 2002; Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Ragins & Cotton, 1996; Scandura, 1998). Eby and colleagues (2000) define negative mentoring “as specific incidents that occur between mentors and protégés, mentors’ characteristic manner of interacting with protégés, or mentors’ characteristics that limit their ability to effectively provide guidance to protégés” (p. 3).

Some researchers have extended their mentoring definitions to include alternative forms of mentoring such as peer mentoring (Bozionelos, 2004), formal and informal mentoring (Chao et al., 1992), and diversified mentoring, relationships where individuals of different racial, ethnic, or gender groups engage in mentoring (Ragins, 1997a, 1997b). Although one can perhaps argue that the core meaning for mentoring remains in wide use, it is certainly the case that multiple meanings have added complexity and in some instances ambiguity. Conceptual clarity seems to have hampered theory development. As Merriam (1983) notes, “How mentoring is defined determines the extent of mentoring found” (p. 165).

### **Concept as a Precursor to Theory**

The most important rule for developing a useful concept is to be able to state its boundary conditions such that we know with some confidence that *X* is an instance of the phenomenon but *Y* is not (Kirshenmann, 1981; Rosenberg, 2005). Few extant concepts of mentoring satisfy the boundary rule. It is certainly easy to understand why this is the case. The term, mentoring, shares “concept space” with closely related phenomena such as coaching and apprenticeship. At its most elemental, mentoring is about the transmission of knowledge. To exemplify some of the difficulties of developing a concept of mentoring that has some explanatory relevance, we provide below a thought experiment that highlights these difficulties, focusing especially on the problem of bounding the mentoring concept.

### **Two Managers: A Thought Experiment**

George H. has just begun working as a deputy budget analyst in the State Department of Energy and Environment. He is assigned to work under the unit’s director, veteran public manager David L. During the first few weeks of the job assignment, the two barely communicate, but George nonetheless learns a great deal from David simply by watching what David does and by reading reports that he produces. During this period George has also learned

much by reading his agency training manual, attending a training session for new employees, watching others working in similar positions, picking up informal cues and “helpful hints” from peers, and developing tacit knowledge or “learning by doing.”

After 2 months, David calls George into his office and says, “you are a fast learner and doing well, I am going to take you under my wing.” David is as good as his word and during the next year or so transmits a great deal of knowledge about financial accounting, works closely with George, and reviews his work products. In addition to the ins and outs of financial accounting, David also tells George more than he really wants to know about office politics, including whom to look out for, whom to choose as an ally, and even who is involved in an office romance and who has a substance abuse problem. As the relationship develops, George learns that for all of David’s knowledge he is utterly incompetent with the organization’s management information systems and generally with computers and, so, George often gives David helpful hints about how to use the system and how to solve problems as they occur. David is appreciative and shows that he, too, is a fast learner.

After 1 year, George is so successful that he is offered a job in another agency of state government. He takes the job of chief budget analyst for the Department of Transportation, a job equivalent in rank and authority to David’s. On reflection George thinks that he has learned a great deal from David and promises to himself to stay in close touch.

Simple as it is, this thought experiment raises some fundamental questions about the nature of mentoring, questions not easily answered by consulting the mentoring literature. We explore these questions below. Many of these questions have implications not only for theory but also for research design.

### **Question: Is Mentoring Different When the Mentor Is the Protégé’s Boss?**

Some mentoring researchers focus on “supervisory mentoring” questioning whether or not one’s boss can be a mentor and whether supervisory mentoring is preferred to nonsupervisory mentoring or vice versa (Burke, McKenna, & McKeen, 1991; Eby, 1997; Green & Bauer, 1995; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Tepper, 1995; Tepper & Taylor, 2003). Eby and colleagues (2000) investigated the conditions under which protégés are most likely to report negative mentoring experiences, such as abuse, neglect, intentional exclusion, tyranny, deception, incompetence, or sexual harassment and found that having a mentor who is one’s supervisor, as compared to non-supervisory mentor, is not related to reporting negative mentoring experiences. Burke and colleagues (1991) tested whether mentoring relationships

are “special” compared to regular supervisor–subordinate relationships and found that there were no significant differences between mentored subordinates and other subordinates, except that those mentored reported higher levels of psychosocial functions such as friendship.

We suggest, in accordance with the literature, that one’s boss should be eligible under the concept “mentor” and that a boss can be an effective mentor. Indeed, saying that one’s boss cannot be a mentor results in an unrealistic delimitation. A boss is a particular type of administrative superior, typically one who interacts more directly, often face-to-face. If we assume that mentoring requires at least some face-to-face interaction, then all those administrative superiors who do not interact directly with the employee cannot be mentors. Surely we do not wish to say that persons in formally superior positions can be mentors only if they have no supervisory connection to the employee. Moreover, employees in contemporary organizations often have several bosses and several administrative superiors with whom they have direct, interactive relationships. If all these were disqualified as mentors, the concept would take a different and less useful shape than it has to this point.

Though bosses should qualify as mentors, mentoring is not synonymous with a good relationship with one’s boss. What about mentoring is different? If a supervisor assists a subordinate, teaches the subordinate new skills, and advances her career, is that supervisor fulfilling a supervisor’s job obligation, or is that a mentor? It is important that mentoring theory and research distinguish between good supervisors and supervisors who mentor.

### **Question: Is Acknowledgement Required for a Mentoring Relationship?**

The vignette seems to imply that David viewed himself as George’s mentor. But although George values at least a portion of the knowledge imparted by David, there is no clear indication that David views George as a mentor. Is conscious recognition required? If so, by whom? The mentor, the protégé, or both?

This question is especially important to research design. For example, if mentoring need not be acknowledged, then the most common approach to its study, questionnaires and survey research, is seriously undercut. As we see from Table 2, questionnaires almost always assume that the respondent can and will identify a mentor (or a protégé) by providing a definition and then asking respondents, “Have you ever had a mentor?” (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Tepper, 1995)

**Table 2**  
**Questionnaire Items Identifying Mentoring**

- 
- “Please provide information regarding your experiences with mentoring relationships. Mentoring relationships are characterized by a close, professional relationship between two individuals—one usually more senior in some regard. The mentor and protégé may or may not be with the same company. . . . Mentoring is defined as a pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the goal [either implicitly or explicitly stated] of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific career-related competencies. Your mentor may or may not be your manager” (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003, pp. 423-424).
- “One type of work relationship is a mentoring relationship. A mentor is generally defined as a higher-ranking, influential individual in your work environment who has advanced experience and knowledge and is committed to providing upward mobility and support in your career. A mentor may or may not be in your organization, and s/he may or may not be your immediate supervisor. Have you ever had a mentor?” (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004, pp. 424-425).
- “How many mentors (someone who actively assists and helps guide your professional development in some significant and ongoing way) have you had?” (Payne & Huffman, 2005, p. 162).
- “Mentorship is defined as an intense work relationship between senior (mentor) and junior (protégé) organizational members. The mentor has experience and power in the organization and personally advises, counsels, coaches, and promotes the career development of the protégé. Promotion of the protégé’s career may occur directly through actual promotions or indirectly through the mentor’s influence and power over other organizational members” (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992, p. 624).
- “Consider your career history since graduating from our program and the degree to which influential managers have served as your sponsor or mentor (this need not be limited to one person)” (Dreher & Ash, 1990, p. 541).
- 

or “How many mentors have helped you?” (Chao et al., 1992, p. 624). Although providing a definition and then asking, for example, “Do you have a mentor?” is in most instances acceptable, this approach also increases the likelihood of “framing” and other response artifacts. Some studies ask a series of questions about the characteristics (Smith, Howard, & Harrington, 2005) and functions of a mentor (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994), making determinations on the basis of those responses. This seems in most instances more useful than asking the respondent to make a global decision about a multifaceted concept. Still, there is no research that investigates relationships where one member of the dyad responds as a mentor or protégé whereas the other does not.

If mentoring is viewed as a phenomenon not requiring awareness or acknowledgement by the persons involved, very different research techniques might be required, such as participant observation or unobtrusive

measures. For example, Burke and McKeen (1997) do not ask respondents about mentoring but ask them “to think of a senior individual who has/had served these functions [coach, tutor, counselor and confidante] for them” (p. 46) and then discusses the findings as mentoring relationships. Do responses to questions of having a mentor differ from responses about identifying an influential person in one’s life?

### **Question: Who Is the Mentor?**

In the beginning of the vignette, David is imparting knowledge to George. But as the relationship advances, George begins to impart knowledge to David. Does this mean that the nature of the relationship has changed such that it is no longer a mentorship? Or does it mean that each is a mentor but in a different realm? Is it perhaps appropriate to think of mentoring as multidimensional, such that one member of a dyad can be the mentor in one or more realms and (for the same dyad) the protégé in other realms? Or does this multidimensional concept of mentoring simply introduce an unacceptable level of complexity?

### **Question: Must the Mentor and the Protégé Like One Another?**

Another interesting question is that of friendship and liking. Can individuals engage in successful mentoring and career development without liking one another? Respect certainly seems necessary but is respect sufficient? Many authors identify psychosocial outcomes of mentoring such as friendship, counseling, and emotional support (Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997; Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988; Scandura, 1992, 1997; Scandura & Viator, 1994). Are these really mentoring outcomes? Or are psychosocial outcomes really just the outcomes of friendship? Does friendship between senior and junior employees constitute mentoring?

### **Question: What Part of Knowledge Transmission Is “Mentoring” and What Part Is Not?**

Social science proceeds quite nicely by stipulation and operationalization. Using this approach, one can, with some concern for precision, furnish an answer to most of the questions raised above. Thus, one can stipulate that the boss is (or is not) eligible as mentor. One can operationalize mentoring relationships as requiring acknowledgement (or not). As long as one

is clear, there is little confusion, except perhaps to metatheoreticians. But this question of the parsing of knowledge transmission gets to the nub of the problem with the mentoring concept. For this reason, it is perhaps the thorniest of the questions we raise.

Let us begin with a part of this issue that can be resolved by stipulation. In the above vignette, David imparted knowledge that was of little interest to George—knowledge about office politics and knowledge, perhaps rumors, about deviant (from the standpoint of organizational norms) behavior. We can simply stipulate (or not) that unwanted knowledge nevertheless qualifies as a basis for mentoring. We can also stipulate (or not) that the information transmitted must be true.

More problematic by far is the fact that knowledge does not place itself into discrete bins. How does one distinguish between typical training and mentoring? In many cases bosses are formally required to train subordinates. But when, if ever, does the training relationship transmute into a mentor relationship? The same might be said for socialization. Peers inevitably impart knowledge, by example and usually more directly. Under what circumstances is this “peer mentoring” and under what circumstances is it “socialization?”

### **Question: Can Groups Mentor Individuals?**

The foregoing question raised another. Is mentoring best viewed as a relation between two people or among a group of people? Kram's (1985) early influential work was based on dyads. The preponderance of the mentoring research focuses on dyadic relationships (Auster, 1984; Eby & Allen, 2002; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Scandura, 1997). Today, however, researchers define mentoring to include group mentoring (Dansky, 1996) and peer mentoring (Bozionelos, 2004; Kram & Isabella, 1985). More recently, Eby (1997) offered a typology that expands mentoring to include alternative forms of group mentoring such as interteam, intrateam, and professional association mentoring. Team mentoring occurs when teams help individuals develop within or across teams. Professional association group mentoring occurs when an entire professional association mentors a protégé by, for example, building social networks (Dansky, 1996). Group mentoring is unique because the mentoring “emerges from the dynamics of the group as a whole, rather than the relationships with any one person” (Dansky, 1996, p. 7). Should a useful mentoring concept be limited to dyads or should it include groups?

### **Question: When Does the Mentoring Begin and End?**

One is tempted to say that the mentoring relationship begins when David sits George down in his office and, essentially, declares himself as George's new mentor. But is it the declaration or the acceptance of the declaration by George? Or, aside from role acceptance, does the mentoring begin only when knowledge is transmitted? Related, is David a mentor to George even before the declaration? We see that George, who was not communicating directly with David, was nonetheless learning from his example and from his work products.

George leaves the organization. By some usages, the mentor and the protégé are not required to be in the same organization (Eby, 1997; Eby et al., 2004). But what about the fact that George and David are now peers in the sense of authority, rank, and perhaps even knowledge? Does this mitigate the relationship's qualification as a mentor relationship? Or are they now "peer mentors," and how is this different from simply a collegial relationship? Furthermore, how does mentoring that advances a protégé to a position in another organization speak to the research on the organizational benefits of mentoring (Eby, 1997; Payne & Huffman, 2005; Russell & Adams, 1997; Tepper & Taylor, 2003; Wilson & Elman, 1990)? Are there term limits on mentoring? Is there a frequency requirement—how often does one or both need to transmit knowledge to sustain a mentoring relationship?

### **Implications**

The purpose of this thought experiment was to highlight the difficulties in developing a useful and usable concept of mentoring. The analysis perhaps also shows, less directly, some of the reasons why research on mentoring is so scattered and why the development of a cumulative, empirically based theory of mentoring still seems daunting even after decades of hard work.

It is worth noting that we have not even begun to attend to the question "what is effective mentoring?" despite the fact that this is the single question that dominates the mentoring literature. It is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of a social technology absent some clarity about its meaning. In the next section, we seek to lend some clarity to the concept of mentoring by providing a provisional definition and some boundary rules.

## **The Mentoring Concept: A Reformulation**

As we suggested above, relatively few scholars actually provide a stipulative definition of mentoring. Most researchers cite Kram's usage or

neglect to provide a definition at all. As we provide ours, it will be apparent why conceptual and definitional issues are so often skirted—any definition that has a hope of distinguishing mentoring from other types of learning will necessarily be a complex one.

In developing our definition, we employ standard criteria (Balzer, 1986; Parsons, 1971). First, the definition should reflect ordinary language usage of the term. The definition need not (and in this instance cannot) be identical to ordinary language use, but it should not be so far removed from reality as to be unrecognizable. Second, the definition should be useful in providing boundaries for mentoring and separating mentoring from related varieties of knowledge transmission. Third and, of course, related to the other two criteria, the definition should be useful for advancing research.

We offer the following definition:

Mentoring: a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé).

The definition is not a radical departure from others found in the literature. However, our definition clearly limits the term *mentoring* in ways that would reject at least some current meanings of the term. That, of course, is the point. The lexical meaning of ambiguity is “multiple meanings” and if everything is mentoring then nothing is.

The definition provides at least some resolution of the various problems suggested by the above George–David vignette. Let us return to those questions. First, “can someone be both boss and mentor?” According to our definition, the boss is not disqualified as mentor, but neither is peer mentoring disqualified. The key element of the definition for this concern is that the knowledge transmission must be informal in nature. If the instruction is part of the formal requirements of the job (or the supervisory relationship), it does not qualify as mentoring. It should also be noted that mentoring requires unequal knowledge, but only in the knowledge domain of the mentoring, and there is no stipulation regarding the status or hierarchical relationship among the parties to the relationship. This implies, then, that it is indeed possible for David to continue as George’s mentor even though George has an equal or greater rank. The definition also suggests that George and David can be one another’s mentors, as long as it is in entirely different domains and there is unequal knowledge.

We feel that the dependence of mentoring on formal hierarchies is a misstep that occurred early in the history of mentoring research and is now well worth rectifying. Indeed, recent mentoring work has already begun to adjust to nonhierarchical relationships (see Higgins & Kram, 2001). Let us consider just a single example that shows the problematic nature of subjecting mentoring to hierarchical relation. Anyone who has combat experience in the U.S. military has a good likelihood of having witnessed the mentoring of junior officers by hierarchically subordinate, but more experienced, non-commissioned officers. A reading of combat memoirs (e.g., Manchester, 1982; Wolff, 1994) reveals that these relationships between junior officers and noncommissioned officers fulfill all of the attributes associated with mentoring, excepting only the unneeded criterion of unequal hierarchical status. Such mentoring not only affected careers but saved countless lives.

With respect to the “is acknowledgement required?” question, the answer from our definition is “yes.” One reason we choose this approach is that the perception of the mentoring may sometimes be as important as the fact of knowledge transmission. Note that our definition does not suggest that mentoring is effective, only that the knowledge received is perceived as useful. We offer this in defense: How sensible is it to speak of having a mentor if one feels that the knowledge provided by the mentor is useless?

Another implication of our definition, an especially important one, is that mentoring is an informal social exchange. This means that the term “formal mentoring” is an oxymoron. This does not mean, however, that the thousands of formal mentoring programs set up in organizations do not result in mentoring relationships, only that they do not develop on command. The question of whether someone in a formal mentoring program has a mentor is an empirical question.

Our use of the term “formal mentoring” is somewhat different from the use prevailing in the literature. Typically, formal mentoring refers to mentoring relationships that are established, recognized, and managed by organizations and are not spontaneous (Chao et al., 1992). Chao and colleagues (1992) concluded that individuals in informal mentoring relationships (i.e., not part of formally sanctioned programs) report more career support and higher salaries than those in formal (sanctioned) mentoring relationships but that protégés in both formal and informal mentoring relationships report more positive outcomes than nonmentored individuals. The research did not consider the cases, if any, where the formal mentoring program assignments did not give rise to a mentoring relationship.

According to Ragins and colleagues (2000), mentoring, whether formal in its origins or not, results in stronger job satisfaction outcomes. But Eby

and Allen (2002) conclude that relationships based on formal program assignments can result in poor dyadic fit leading to more negative experiences and higher turnover and stress than is found in mentoring relationships that are informal in origin. In addition, Tepper (1995) found that informal-originated mentored protégés engage in upward maintenance tactics of their relationships with supervisors, whereas there are few differences between formal program-originated protégés and employees who are not mentored. Those in formal programs place more value on mentor traits (e.g., gender and rank) than behavior (Smith et al., 2005). Our decision to define mentoring in such a way as to disqualify formal mentoring contains no judgment about the thousands of formal mentoring programs that have been set up in organizations. We view formal mentoring programs as sowing the seeds of relationships, many of which flower into useful and productive mentor relationships.

A second stipulation of our definition is that there is a transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support that is related to work. It is often noted that mentoring relationships can include an element of socioemotional support that has nothing to do with any cognitive notion of knowledge. We agree that this is often a concomitant of mentoring relations, and often a very important one, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for mentoring. If one receives only socioemotional support then one does not have a mentor, one has a friend. By contrast, if one respects a mentor, but does not consider the mentor a friend and receives little or no socioemotional support, one can nonetheless prove a valuable source of organizational and career knowledge. To be sure, there is some level of social ingratiation required for any relationship (including mentoring) to work. One cannot despise a person and work effectively with that person as a protégé. But the friendship and emotional minimum seems to us a low one.

“When does mentoring begin and end?” This issue remains troubling because it is in part one of quanta. It is easy enough to say that mentoring does not begin until (a) the knowledge of interest (or the social capital and network ties) has begun to be both transmitted and received and (b) the two parties recognize the role. But the end of the mentoring relationship is a function of two factors, each potentially measurable but neither obvious in its scale calibration. First, when there is no longer an inequality in the focal knowledge domain, the mentoring relationship ends (at least within that domain—it may continue in another). But it is not easy to make such a determination. Certainly, self-reports will be suspect. Second, the mentoring ends with limited contact and limited transmission of knowledge. Inevitably, some judgment is required to determine just when the character and amount

of knowledge transmitted has changed such that a mentor relationship has ceased. Because acknowledgment of the mentoring relationship is a component of our definition, a practical means of determining when the relationship ends is self-reporting.

## Locating the Mentoring Concept

Finally, let us consider the question we identified as the thorniest one: “What part of knowledge transmission is mentoring and what part is not?” We noted that knowledge does not place itself neatly into bins labeled “mentoring,” “training,” or “socialization.”

Table 3 provides a comparison of, respectively, formal training, socialization, and mentoring. Although the categorization does not in each case meet the strictest criteria for cell types—mutual exclusiveness and exhaustiveness—it nonetheless provides substantial discrimination among the three often-confused modes of transmitting work-related knowledge. The distinctions in the table include the number of participants, relationship bases, recognition, needs fulfillment, and knowledge content. There seems no need to recapitulate the elements of the table, but it is perhaps worth emphasizing that the utility of knowledge provided by the three mechanisms is somewhat different.

If the mentoring relationship is informal and voluntary and it fails to satisfy the needs of the dyad, then there is little reason to expect that it will be sustained, regardless of the possible benefits to organizations, their goals, and their missions. This is, of course, an important distinction with training. Training often serves individual needs and may be most effective when organizational training needs are aligned with individual needs. But training is not necessarily voluntary and its functioning does not necessarily depend on meeting individual needs. Likewise, socialization need not meet individual needs. If we think of the classic human relations studies of informal work groups (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939) then we see that socialization may benefit the group or the organization to the detriment of the individual.

## Conclusion

Is the glass half full or half empty? From one perspective, the study of mentoring seems a great success story. Starting in the late 1970s with a fresh research topic, hundreds of studies have been produced using a variety of methods and theoretical premises. Taken individually, a great many

**Table 3**  
**Comparing Three Processes for Transmitting**  
**Work-Related Knowledge**

	Formal Training	Socialization	Mentoring
Number of participants	Infinite	Dependent on group size	Dyads (including sets of dyads)
Relationship bases	Authority mediated	Informal, typically entailing unequal knowledge or experience	Informal, requiring unequal knowledge
Recognition	Recognition and self-awareness unavoidable	Does not require recognition	Requires recognition (by both parties) for role enactment
Needs fulfillment	Multiple, but must include organization or authority-derived objectives	Multiple, but must include group needs	Multiple, but must serve the needs of the two voluntary participants
Knowledge utility	Includes knowledge presumed relevant to attaining organization mission or goals or formal job requirements	May or may not serve sanctioned work objectives, knowledge develops or reinforces group norms	Must be work relevant, but from the self-interested perspective of the involved parties

of these studies provide important insights. Taken together, the mentoring theory remains underdeveloped.

If one agrees that mentoring theory is underdeveloped, one can perhaps also agree that there are many reasons why this is the case. The work is, commendably, multidisciplinary and, thus, draws from many theoretical perspectives. But this has had the effect of fragmenting theory. Mentoring research is often, and commendably, instrumental in its motivations. But this has had the effect of certain impatience with continuity and broad-based explanation. In our judgment, the most important reason for limited progress toward a more unifying theory of mentoring is a failure to confront some of the lingering conceptual gaps in research and theory. In many instances, important studies of mentoring do not even provide a careful definition of the phenomenon. In most instances it is not easy to sort mentoring from adjacent concepts such as training, coaching, socialization, and even friendship. Our critique has sought, with the application of a thought experiment, to highlight some of the conceptual issues that require attention if research is to produce more powerful explanations.

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**Barry Bozeman** is Ander Crenshaw Professor and Regents' Professor Public Policy at the Department of Public Administration and Policy, the University of Georgia. He specializes in public management and science and technology policy. He has a PhD in political science from The Ohio State University.

**Mary K. Feeney** is a doctoral student in the Department of Public Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. Her research interests include public management, public policy, and mentoring. She has a master's in public policy from Rutgers University (2004) and a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Wyoming (2000).