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Who Is a Mentor? A Review of Evolving Definitions and Implications for Research

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The authors' review of the mentoring literature describes how the construct has changed since Kram's influential work in the early 1980s, the implications of such changes for the field, and suggestions for the future. In addition to highlighting changes over time in the topics mentoring researchers have studied, the authors provide an in-depth review of the way researchers have defined mentoring and the implications of those definitions. They identified approximately 40 different definitions used in the empirical literature since 1980. The discussion of definitions is followed by a delineation of the core attributes of all mentoring relationships and recommendations for specific information that researchers should collect about the relationship. The authors conclude by describing research trends and directions for future mentoring research.

Keywords: *mentoring; careers; training; development*

The topic of mentoring has received considerable attention in both the academic and popular presses as well as in the highly public venue of the Internet. For example, a recent Google search on "mentor quotes" revealed several websites devoted to famous quotations about and by famous mentors as well as places where people can post descriptions of individuals who they considered to be mentors (e.g., <http://www.quotesdaddy.com/tag/Mentor>, accessed June 9, 2010). Viewing just a few of these websites confirms what mentoring

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scholars have acknowledged for some time: that the word *mentor* has many and varied meanings to people (Kram, 1985). We examine the research literature to study what the term *mentor* means to scholars. Although the mentoring literature has been reviewed previously, we extend those reviews by examining within-construct differences in the definitions of mentoring used by researchers and the implications of those differences for our understanding of mentoring. In particular, we describe how the construct has changed over the past three decades, the implications of such changes for the field, and suggestions for the future. As an integral part of this effort we provide a comprehensive review of definitions presented to research participants in published empirical studies.

In mentoring research, if no definition is provided, participants (protégés and/or mentors) must rely on their own schema of what a mentor is, with the result that many different kinds of relationships and arrangements may be included in the study. Thus, researchers often provide a definition of mentoring in an attempt to reduce variability among study participants in their conceptualization of a mentor and/or mentoring relationships. However, one concern is that researchers could be substituting the variety of participants' perceptions of mentors with the variety of researchers' perceptions.

It is important to consider how mentoring *definitions* may influence research outcomes for various reasons. First, we know from several recent reviews that mentoring results in benefits such as increased job satisfaction, higher pay, and more promotions for protégés (e.g., Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Underhill, 2006). However, to understand the construct of mentoring we need to evaluate the definitions provided to research participants to determine whether we are measuring the same construct across studies. As noted by scholars, although defining a construct is a difficult task, "the importance of a well-defined construct cannot be overstated" (Netemeyer, Bearden, & Sharma, 2003: 89). Furthermore, the mentoring literature reflects a wide range in the percentage of people who self-identify as protégés (33%–81%), suggesting that an examination of how mentoring is defined may be beneficial.

We begin with an overview of mentoring research with respect to research topics and perspectives. We then provide an in-depth discussion of the issues and implications presented by how "mentor" and the mentoring relationship are defined in research. We attempt to make more explicit the historical differences in definitions, and we provide recommendations regarding specific information about mentoring relationships that should be collected from research participants, depending on the purposes of the research. We use an inductive approach in which we describe the various definitions in the mentoring literature, highlight their different dimensions and characteristics, and arrive at a framework that clarifies key distinctions within the mentoring construct. Finally, our review considers changes and new emphases in mentoring research we anticipate for the future—changes with implications for conceptualizing and defining mentoring in future research.

Mentoring Research over Time

Our review of the literature focused on empirical workplace mentoring articles published from 1980 to 2009 in the primary journals for mentoring research: *Academy of Management*

Journal, Career Development International, Career Development Quarterly, Group & Organization Management, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Journal of Management, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Vocational Behavior, and Personnel Psychology. We used the PsycINFO electronic database to search each journal for empirical articles using the search terms *mentor* and *protégé*. Only articles that directly assessed a mentoring-related variable (i.e., presence of a mentor, willingness to mentor, etc.) in a workplace context were included. A total of 124 articles was included in our review. As part of our examination of how mentoring has evolved as a construct, we examined the research included in our literature review within 5-year time frames: 1980–1984, 1985–1989, 1990–1994, 1995–1999, 2000–2004, and 2005–2009. In the next section we provide our observations of the particular research topics, perspectives, and methodologies across these time periods.

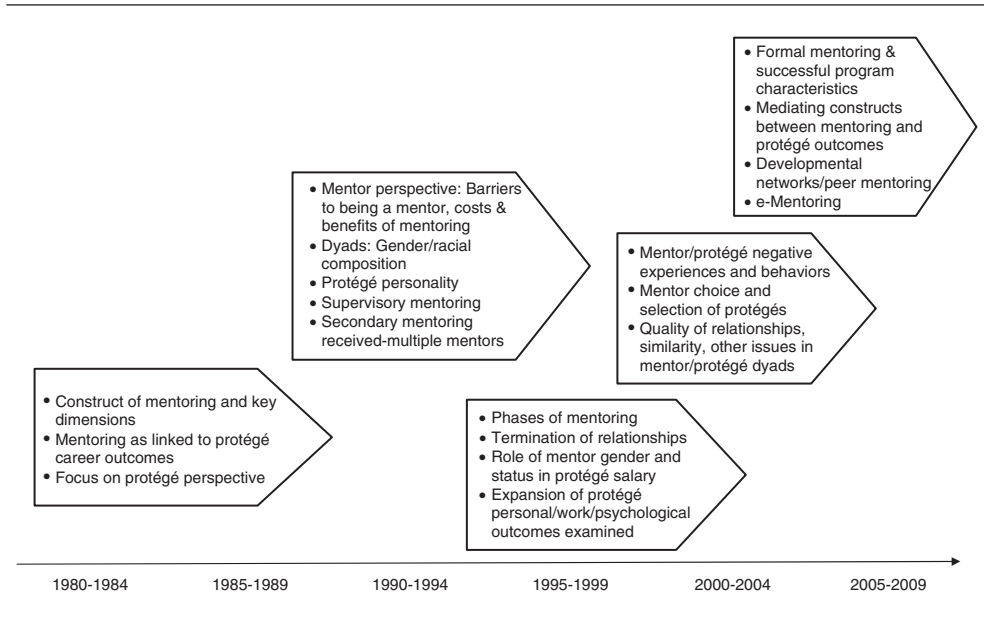
Topics/Developments in Mentoring Research Across Time

A wide variety of topics were investigated in mentoring research across the time spectrum from 1980 to 2009, with some shifts in focus and emphasis across this spectrum. For example, although we see an increase in the number of published studies on formal mentoring in recent years, we note that the topic was introduced in the literature quite early, and there were at least some scholars during each time period who examined formal mentoring programs. Noe's (1988) widely cited study of formal mentoring of teachers occurred during the second 5-year period we examined. Similarly, a few years later a seminal study by Chao, Walz, and Gardner (1992) examined both formal and informal mentoring in relation to mentoring functions and career outcomes received by protégés, and very recently Weinberg and Lankau (in press) conducted a longitudinal, mentor-centric investigation of formal mentoring relationships. Our examination of studies explicitly examining formal mentoring indicates that the period from 2005 to the present has generated the greatest quantity of formal mentoring research. As we highlight below, however, there are numerous studies across the years in which protégés have been asked about mentors and mentoring received, *without any distinction* made as to whether the mentoring received was formal or informal. In this vein, Allen et al.'s (2008) methodological review of mentoring research through 2006 found that almost 40% of the articles reviewed did not specify the type of mentorship being studied.

Similarly, Kram's (1985) seminal qualitative work on mentoring not only introduced the key dimensions of career and psychosocial mentoring but also attested to the important role of networks of developmental relationships as a broader phenomenon than traditional dyadic mentoring. Nevertheless, although the role of developmental networks in one's career has been acknowledged by mentoring scholars since the earliest years, only in recent years has this phenomenon received significant attention in the research literature.

It was not surprising to see that throughout the span of mentoring research a strong, dominant focus has been the benefits of informal mentoring for (and as reported by) protégés. The array of benefits studied has gradually broadened over time, a positive trend. But the interest in protégé outcomes—whether objective or subjective, financial or psychological, personal or work related—has been a focus of mentoring scholars during all the time

Figure 1
Notable Topics and Developments in Mentoring Research across Time



frames we examined. However, numerous additional topics were introduced by scholars during particular time frames. Most of these new topics (e.g., those displayed in Figure 1) spurred at least a small stream of subsequent literature. But we also occasionally observed interesting studies that could be labeled as “one-hit wonders” that received little or no follow-up and that continue to deserve additional research attention. An example is an examination of how mentoring can play a role in perceptions of procedural and distributive justice (Scandura, 1997).

To illustrate the richness and diversity of the mentoring literature in terms of topics, we display in Figure 1 an array of notable topics and developments across the three decades for which we reviewed the literature. Our observations displayed in the figure are based on examining 124 articles as well as our own knowledge of the mentoring literature. We acknowledge that there is considerable overlap in topics and developments over the years. Nonetheless, we believe that our simplified overview provides insight into major trends in mentoring research across time.

Approaches to Identifying Mentoring Relationships

In examining the mentoring literature, there appear to be two common approaches to determining whether or not a mentoring relationship exists. The first approach establishes

whether or not a person “has a mentor.” Specifically, respondents are given a definition of a mentor and then asked if they currently have or have ever had a mentor (e.g., Baugh, Lankau, & Scandura, 1996). Those who respond that they have, or have had, a mentor are considered as self-identified protégés, and often a comparison is made between those who are protégés and those who are not. In the second approach participants complete a multiple-item measure of “mentoring functions received” (e.g., Burke & McKeen, 1997), which is sometimes preceded by a definition of a mentor. The mentoring functions measure lists a series of actions or behaviors that mentors have engaged in on behalf of the protégé. The comparison in this case is often related to the types and/or amount of mentoring functions received. Thus, the major distinction between the two approaches appears to be examining the *presence* of a mentor versus examining the *mentoring functions* received, although as indicated above, sometimes a definition is provided to study participants who then indicate the mentoring functions received from that mentor.

Unfortunately, scholars have made little, if any, distinction across studies with regard to the implications of being in a mentoring relationship versus receiving mentoring functions. We note, however, that Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima (2004) observed, in their meta-analytic review, that effect sizes for objective indicants of protégé career success were *stronger* when comparing “mentored versus nonmentored” individuals, as opposed to studies of mentoring functions provided to protégés as predictors of objective outcomes. Furthermore, it seems logical that providing mentoring functions is a necessary but not sufficient condition for establishing the existence of a mentoring relationship. For example, although an individual might receive mentoring functions from a variety of people, it is possible that none of those relationships meet the standard for being considered a mentoring relationship, depending on how mentoring is defined.

In general the number of studies including a definition has increased over time, with the exception of the 2005–2009 time frame. As the number of studies using definitions proliferated, so did variations in how mentoring was defined. From a chronological perspective the major evolutionary changes were (a) including more details about mentor behaviors (functions) versus roles, beginning in the 1990s (e.g., Chao et al., 1992) and continuing with more detail over time (Allen, Poteet, Russell, & Dobbins, 1997); (b) drawing distinctions between supervisors and mentors, beginning in the early 1990s (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993); (c) drawing distinctions between formal (assigned) and informal relationships, in the 1990s (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993; Ragins & Cotton, 1999); (d) acknowledging that a mentor may be outside one’s organization, in the late 1990s (Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and early 2000s (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000); and (e) moving toward incorporating the goals of the particular mentoring relationship (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). Although each of these issues introduced a new element into the definitions, a chronological review indicates that for all time periods, with the exception of the 1980s, which was characterized by shorter, less detailed definitions, some researchers used brief, vague definitions while other researchers used longer, more detailed definitions. Therefore, rather than continue with a chronological discussion, we discuss specific examples of differences among the definitions on an issue-by-issue basis. Table 1 displays a sampling of definitions illustrating the range of definitions from least to most specific.

Table 1
Examples of Mentoring Definitions

A senior manager who provides emotional support, guidance, and sponsorship to a less experienced person.	Kirchmeyer (1995: 72)
“Someone in a position of power who looks out for you, or gives you advice, or brings your accomplishments to the attention of other people who have power in the company.”	Fagenson (1989: 312)
“Someone, other than your manager or immediate coworkers, who provides you with technical or career advice, coaching, or information on an informal basis.”	Seibert (1999: 493-494)
“An influential individual in your work environment (typically a more senior member of your organization or profession) who has advanced experience and knowledge and who is committed to the enhancement and support of your career.”	Forret and de Janasz (2005: 484)
“A mentor is defined as an individual who holds a position senior to yours who takes an active interest in developing your career. While it is possible for an immediate supervisor to serve as a mentor, relationships of this type represent a special opportunity to interact with a senior manager. The standard subordinate/supervisor relationship is <i>not</i> a mentoring relationship. In the questions to follow please indicate whether or not you consider one or more individuals to be your mentor (while it is possible to have multiple mentors, the nature of the relationship implies that the number of people appropriately classified as your mentor will be small.)”	Dreher and Chargois (1998: 406); Dreher and Cox (1996: 301)
“This questionnaire uses the concepts ‘mentor’ and ‘coach’ and ‘protégé’ several times. Not everybody uses the same definitions for these concepts, therefore we ask that you read the following definitions with care before responding to the questions. A protégé is the person who is guided and supported by a mentor or coach. A mentor is an influential individual with a higher ranking in your work environment who has advanced experience and knowledge so he/she can give you support, guidance, and advice for your development. Your mentor can be from inside or outside your organization, but is not your immediate supervisor. He/she is recognized as an expert in his/her field. Most of the mentor relations are long term and focus on general objectives of development.”	Van Emmerik, Baugh, and Euwema (2005: 314)
“Mentoring is described as a one to one relationship between a more experienced and senior person (Mentor) and a new entrant or less experienced person (his/her protégé) in the organizational setup. The Mentor need not be the supervisor or department head and not necessarily from the same department. A mentor can generally be defined as an influential individual in your work environment who has advanced work experience and knowledge and who is committed to providing upward mobility and support to your career.” Then subjects were instructed, “You may not have experienced mentoring in a formalized manner but informally at some point in your career or even currently, you may be relating to some person who provides you with psychosocial support as well as shows interest in your career movement.”	Scandura and Williams (2001: 349; 2004: 455)
“Over the course of your career, have you had a mentor? A mentor is an experienced employee who serves as a role model, provides support, direction and feedback regarding career plans and interpersonal development. A mentor is also someone who is in a position of power, who looks out for you, gives you advice and/or brings your accomplishments to the attention of people who have power in the company. In order to assist individuals in their development and advancement, some organizations have established formal mentoring programs, where protégés and mentors are linked in some way. This may be accomplished by assigning mentors or by just providing formal opportunities aimed at developing the relationship. To recap, formal mentoring programs are developed with organizational assistance. Informal mentoring relationships are developed spontaneously, without organizational assistance.”	Day and Allen (2004: 77)

Definitional Issues

As mentioned earlier, Kram (1985) acknowledged, in her seminal work on mentoring, that the word *mentor* could mean different things to different people. Because of the potential for these diverse perceptions, researchers began providing a specific definition in an attempt to reduce variability among study participants in their conceptualization of mentoring. Our review of definitions was based on a slightly smaller number of articles (117) than our overall review because we excluded studies that studied only formal mentoring relationships or did not require protégés to evaluate a definition of mentoring. Our review identified approximately 40 different definitions (and their slight variations) used in the empirical literature since 1980 (see Table 1 for examples). That suggests the question, have researchers substituted the variability of respondent perceptions with the variability of researcher perceptions?

Although researchers have acknowledged considerable variety in mentor descriptions, to date there has been little discussion or examination of the differences in the definitions. There are, of course, a few notable exceptions. For example, Eby, Rhodes, and Allen (2007) described how mentoring overlaps with, but is distinctly different from, other developmental relationships such as role model–observer, teacher–student, advisor–advisee, supervisor–subordinate and coach–client. Although Eby et al. (2007) did an excellent job of differentiating these relationships from mentoring, they gave less attention to within-construct differences in the definitions of mentoring. In their review, Wanberg, Welsh, and Hezlett (2003) stated that while some scholars have criticized the lack of consistency in definitions of mentoring, there is consistency in the “general concept” of mentoring, at least for traditional mentoring relationships. Many scholars share the general view that a mentor is a more senior person who provides various kinds of personal and career assistance to a less senior or experienced person (the “protégé” or “mentee”). Nonetheless, more recently, Dougherty and Dreher (2007) noted the importance of understanding differences in mentor definitions and called for a systematic examination of these differences and their potential impact.

Although the general concept of mentoring might be perceived relatively consistently, if the actual definitions provided to research participants are not, then the inconsistency in mentoring definitions calls into question the construct validity of mentoring and our conclusions about mentoring relationships. According to classical test theory (Nunnally, 1978), to measure a well-defined construct, researchers sample items from a hypothetical domain of items such that the items used to measure the construct are representative of the global set of items in that domain; this representativeness is necessary to generalize from the specific items to the construct. Applying this logic to mentoring relationships implies that the definition (i.e., item) used to measure mentoring needs to be representative of the universe of mentoring definitions. It is important to emphasize, however, that to date there has not been a thorough, systematic examination of the variability in mentoring definitions used by researchers and the potential influence of those variations on our research. We believe this in-depth look is necessary to understand how differently mentoring is described across studies and whether such differences influence who identifies themselves as a protégé as well as other research results. As one example, using a definition containing the phrase *gives advice* will likely inflate the correlation between having a mentor and an item in an outcome variable that measures the receipt of advice in the workplace.

Differences in Specifications about Mentors and Mentoring

In examining the definitions provided to protégés (and mentors) we observed two important and related issues. First, there are striking differences in the overall level of detail in the definitions with respect to who a mentor is and/or what a mentor does. Some definitions are quite general about who and what a mentor is/does (Scandura & Ragins, 1993), while others are very specific not only about who a mentor is and what a mentor does, but also how and why they do it (Mullen & Noe, 1999). Second, we identify four boundary conditions that could produce different research results: (a) the mentor's place within the organizational hierarchy, (b) supervisory versus nonsupervisory mentoring, (c) inside versus outside mentor, and (d) level of relationship intimacy. Related to these boundary conditions is the abundance of similar but not necessarily synonymous words used to describe a mentor's identity and behavior. Herein lies a significant portion of the nuances in defining mentorships that might affect the number of people self-identifying as protégés, as well as relationships of mentoring with other variables.

Our purpose here is to raise awareness of the different definitions and the potential impact of specific (versus vague) definitions. Any definition has advantages and disadvantages; our goal is to make those advantages and disadvantages more salient. We assume the original researchers were thoughtful in their choice of definition for the purposes of their studies, but whether that definition is appropriate for other studies is open to interpretation. We first discuss the level of specificity of the definition, which we follow with a discussion of the related issue of boundary conditions.

Level of Specificity

In examining the range of definitions, at one end of the detail spectrum researchers state, "Respondents were asked to indicate if they had experienced a working relationship that significantly affected their career mobility in their firm" (Scandura & Ragins, 1993: 256). This description has the advantage of being broad and inclusive and does not restrict which actions were taken or who took them on behalf of the protégé. The use of such a broad definition will likely result in more self-identified protégés than will the use of a more restrictive definition. However, the definition is so broad as to include a range of relationships that might be qualitatively different and perhaps not comparable across respondents.

In general, researchers have assumed that a definition is better than no definition in reducing variability in respondents, that is, they assumed that because the word *mentor* means different things to different people, that giving participants a definition would ensure that participants were responding to the same perception. However, if the definition is so vague as to leave room for considerable interpretation, then researchers may not have reduced the variability in interpretation among respondents. Notably, we found no studies that empirically test the comparative advantage of using a definition versus using the word *mentor* alone to test for any differences in the number or quality of responses. Furthermore, broad definitions may include relationships that would be excluded using more specific definitions and thus might complicate comparison across, or aggregations of, studies.

At the other extreme are definitions that are quite restrictive and include very specific examples of mentoring functions provided by the mentor, such as coaching, guidance, feedback, encouragement, and emotional support (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2005; Chao, 1997; Kirchmeyer, 1995). Some definitions even include a motive for the relationship (e.g., “with the agreed-on goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies”; Godshalk & Sosik, 2000: 109). Using a more explicit and specific definition will likely result in fewer self-identified protégés as the restrictions on what characteristics the relationship must exhibit are increased. However, these explicit definitions enhance the probability that the relationships being examined within each study are substantially similar. The issue of level of detail in definitions could be framed in terms of specificity and sensitivity. Less specific definitions are more sensitive to detecting the existence of mentoring relationships while more specific definitions are less sensitive to a variety of relationships and instead more likely to ensure consistent interpretation across respondents. The optimal definition would depend on the purpose of the study and the degree to which the researcher is interested in a very specific type of mentor. Definitions that contain details on observable *mentor behaviors* (functions) might result in fewer self-identified protégés than those that are vague because protégés are required to make judgments when they have no direct knowledge. For example, some definitions require that the protégé classify the mentor as “influential” (e.g., Baugh et al., 1996). Determining how influential a mentor is might be a tough call for a protégé, particularly one who is new to the firm and has little knowledge of the firm’s internal politics or the mentor’s exercise of influence. Also, protégés probably have to make inferences about the mentor’s level of commitment to “providing upward mobility and support” to the protégé’s career. Mentor activities that indicate such a commitment might be unseen by the protégé. Because protégés might have limited access to information regarding levels of influence or commitment, they might not consider their mentors to qualify as influential or committed, which might result in lower “protégé rates” when using such definitions.

Continuing with our discussion of mentor behaviors, the issue of which mentor functions are included in a definition is of particular interest. The functions are the specific behaviors that mentors enact on behalf of and/or with the protégé, and they are the central features of the mentoring relationship. These functions are generally classified into two broad categories: *career functions*—sponsorship, exposure and visibility, and challenging assignments—and *psychosocial functions*—counseling, friendship, acceptance, and confirmation. Definitions varied not only in the extent to which they included or implied mentor functions but also in which specific mentor functions or behavior were included.

Career functions were either alluded to or explicitly included in the overwhelming majority of definitions we reviewed. The vaguest definitions used phrases such as “helped you by supporting your career” (Aryee, Lo, & Kang, 1999: 568) or “looks out for you, or gives you advice” (Wallace, 2001: 374). However, the phrase “is committed to providing upward mobility and support” to the protégé’s career (e.g., Ragins & Cotton, 1991: 942) was the most popular. The prevalence of career functions in mentoring definitions might indicate that career functions (and career outcomes) are the most important aspect of the mentoring relationship.

While career functions were referenced in the majority of the definitions, psychosocial functions were referenced less frequently. Notably, none of the definitions focused solely on psychosocial functions. Again, such evidence suggests that mentoring researchers see career

functions as more consistent with workplace mentoring relationships than psychosocial functions. In general, the studies that included psychosocial functions in the definition mentioned either providing personal support/counsel (e.g., Chao, 1997; Eby et al., 2000) or promoting protégé growth/development (Fagenson, 1992; Mullen & Noe, 1999).

Role modeling is an important dimension of the mentoring relationship and is alternately classified as either a psychosocial function (Kram, 1985) or a distinct third type of function (e.g., Scandura, 1992). Regardless of how the role modeling behavior is categorized, it is one of the foundational elements of mentoring. However, very few definitions specifically mention “role model” when describing a mentor (e.g., Day & Allen, 2004; Fagenson, 1992). Considering the important place role modeling holds in the mentoring dynamic, its omission is quite curious.

Boundary Conditions

The second issue we identified relates to the key characteristics, or boundary conditions, contained in the definition. Although some definitions explicitly state boundary conditions, other definitions only imply such conditions using related, but not necessarily synonymous, words used to describe a mentor’s identity and behavior. In this section we discuss four boundary conditions reflected in mentor definitions: (a) mentor’s place within the organizational hierarchy, (b) supervisory versus nonsupervisory mentor, (c) inside versus outside mentor, and (d) level of intimacy. Each of these boundary conditions and the numerous ways they are described are proposed to have an impact on both respondents’ reporting of a mentor and also how mentoring relates to other variables. We begin with the mentor’s place within the organizational hierarchy.

Mentor’s place within the organizational hierarchy. The mentor’s place in the organizational hierarchy, either relative to the protégé or in absolute terms, is important for at least two reasons. First, it probably influences the number of self-identified protégés. Often definitions imply that the mentor is higher in the organizational hierarchy, although this is indicated using such varied terms as “more senior member” (Nielson, Carlson, & Lankau, 2001), “higher-ranking” (Ragins & Cotton, 1991), “high-ranking” (Ragins & Scandura, 1997), or “in a position of power” (Fagenson, 1994). While each of these descriptors seems to either explicitly or implicitly require a difference in the organizational hierarchy, they do not all clearly identify just where in the hierarchy the mentor is located. One may be “higher-ranking” or “more senior” than one’s protégé without being either particularly high-ranking or senior in an absolute sense. Requiring that the mentor be “high-ranking” or “in a position of power” likely reduces the number of protégés by eliminating from consideration relationships within lower levels of the organization’s hierarchy.

Second, the mentor’s place in the hierarchy dictates which mentoring functions the mentor is capable of providing. For example, mentors higher within the hierarchy are presumed to have more power and thus more ability to provide sponsorship and exposure/visibility. In addition, studies specifying that the mentor is higher than the protégé in the hierarchy (versus peers or those simply more senior) might be more likely to observe a protégé’s receipt of a full range of career mentoring functions (e.g., exposure/visibility, sponsorship) and more

likely to find that mentoring is related to protégés' career progress. Higher level managers or executives have the power and connections in the organization to "make things happen" for a protégé's career.

Although the majority of studies either implied or explicitly stated some hierarchical difference between the mentor and protégé, some definitions could be interpreted as allowing for a more experienced *peer* to serve as a mentor (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003), and a few studies specifically included peers as possible mentors (Eby et al., 2000). Kram and Isabella (1985) noted that although peer relationships can provide similar functions as those provided in traditional mentoring relationships, there are several important differences between those two types of relationships. For example, peer and traditional mentoring relationships differ in hierarchical level and/or age with peers being more similar, and in reciprocity, with peer relationships typically providing more of a two-way exchange. Differentiating peer from traditional mentoring relationships is important, as evidence suggests that peers provide different levels of mentoring support and satisfaction than do traditional mentors (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Marelich, 2002; Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001).

The inclusion of peer mentors likely increases the number of potential protégés in a study. Furthermore, studies with definitions that allow for peer mentoring also might be more likely to observe protégé receipt of psychosocial mentoring functions, positive work attitudes, and personal adjustment. In contrast, these studies would be less likely to observe receipt of career mentoring functions and protégé career progress. Peers can be a strong source of social support and friendship but typically do not have the organizational power to enhance one's career progress.

Supervisory versus nonsupervisory mentor. Closely related to the issue of hierarchy is whether a study allows for the protégé's immediate supervisor to be labeled as a mentor. Although most definitions do not acknowledge the potential role of supervisors as mentors, this boundary condition has several implications. First, studies that include information regarding the percentage of supervisory relationships indicate that a material number of mentoring relationships take place within a supervisor-subordinate relationship (e.g., 85%, Burke & McKeen, 1997). In fact, in one study 97% of the self-identified protégés indicated that their mentor had also been their supervisor at some point during their career (Day & Allen, 2004). In contrast, the definition used by Ostroff and Kozlowski (1993) specifically excludes supervisors as potential mentors, and the percentage of self-identified protégés in their study was only 33%. We expect that excluding supervisors from consideration as mentors substantially decreases the number of people who consider themselves to have a mentor, although we do not know of any research that has investigated this issue.

Second, supervisory mentors appear to provide more functions than nonsupervisory mentors (e.g., Burke & McKeen, 1997; Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997). Studies with mentoring definitions that allow for or even specify direct supervisory mentoring are likely to find differences in protégés' receipt of various mentoring functions, compared to nonsupervisory mentoring. For example, some career functions would be more readily received from supervisors, such as coaching and challenging work assignments, whereas higher-level executives might be better positioned to provide exposure and visibility. The rationale here relates to the direct supervisor's limited organizational power to provide certain career

functions, compared to higher level executives. Finally, because of supervisors' direct power over subordinates, it also makes sense that inclusion of supervisory mentoring allows for the maximum opportunity to observe negative or abusive mentoring relationships, a recent area of research interest.

Inside versus outside mentor. Most definitions either explicitly state or strongly imply that the mentor is in the protégé's organization (e.g., Nielson et al., 2001; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). However, a few explicitly state that the mentor "may or may not be" in the organization (e.g., Godshalk & Sosik, 2003; Mullen & Noe, 1999; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000), with the remaining definitions being fairly ambiguous as to the mentor's location. One frequently used term that implies that the mentor is in the same organization is "in your work environment." One could argue that some individuals would interpret "work environment" narrowly to mean in the same firm, whereas others might see the term more broadly and include relationships with individuals outside the organization. Researchers who use mentoring definitions that allow for outside the organization mentoring might be less likely to detect protégés' receipt of career (versus psychosocial) mentoring functions and to detect a linkage of mentoring with protégé career progress. Outsiders, presumably, cannot provide the full range of career assistance functions. For example, it is unlikely they could provide sponsorship, protection, or challenging assignments to their outside protégés. Furthermore, we expect that studies including outside mentors would be less likely to observe negative or abusive mentoring since such abuse is likely enabled by hierarchical working relationships within an organization.

Level of relationship intimacy. The descriptions "close" (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000) and "intense" (Chao, 1997) imply a quality Wanberg et al. (2003) referred to as intimacy. An underlying assumption in mentoring research is that mentoring relationships involve some degree of intimacy between the mentor and the protégé; however, this closeness is explicitly acknowledged in only a few studies. Furthermore, in addition to the fact that the interpretation of "close" or "intense" might be highly variable across respondents, "close" and "intense" might not mean the same thing to an individual. Restricting the relationship in this manner would be expected to result in fewer respondents identifying themselves as protégés.

Related to the closeness aspect is whether or not the definition itself restricts the mentor to "informal" status. As Wanberg et al. (2003) emphasized, the mentoring literature needs more precise clarification of the differences between formal and informal relationships. The level of formality is explicit in research that intentionally targets formal mentoring relationships or programs. However, consistent with previous reviews (Allen et al., 2008) we found that the distinction between formal and informal relationships rarely is made unless the purpose of the research is to examine formal relationships. In some instances the definition has outlined the difference between formal and informal relationships and asked the protégé to self-classify (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), while in other instances the definition stated specifically that the mentor helped "even though they were not formally required to do so" (Aryee et al., 1999; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). The use of the phrase "deliberate pairing" could also be construed as implying a formal relationship (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Because

differences have been found between formal and informal relationships on key variables such as career-related support (e.g., Chao et al., 1992), it is important for researchers to clarify whether or not the relationships being studied are formal.

Throughout this section of the article we have commented on how a particular detail in a definition might influence the proportion of respondents who would self-identify as a protégé. We examined our set of studies to determine whether we could report the percentages of self-identified protégés as a way to support our assertions. Unfortunately, the percentage of self-identified protégés was not available for every study, and many of the definitions had some degree of overlap, which made it difficult to make fair comparisons. Thus, we were not able to analyze the studies to empirically determine whether definitional attributes were related to the frequency of self-identifying as a protégé. However, we encourage future research to examine how mentor definitional attributes influence responses, including self-identifying as a protégé and perhaps other characteristics that differentiate protégés from nonprotégés. An experiment designed specifically to test the effects of different definitional attributes would likely provide the best opportunity for clarity.

Defining Mentoring: Key Attributes and Recommendations for Researchers

Although we have devoted attention to outlining how the mentoring literature has defined mentoring in various ways, we do not believe that a single precise and comprehensive definition of a mentor or mentoring is advisable at this point. However, consistent with Locke's (2007) statements regarding the definition of a construct, researchers should be able to come to agreement on the fundamental attributes of a mentoring relationship. Mentoring is a type of developmental relationship that shares some characteristics with other interpersonal relationships, developmental and otherwise. If agreement can be reached on the fundamental, distinctive attributes that set mentoring apart from other relationships, then researchers can incorporate boundary conditions and the issue becomes what type of mentor is being studied.

Based on our analysis of the mentoring literature, we provide some core attributes of mentoring as guidance to researchers in defining and measuring mentoring at work. We also draw from the work of Eby et al. (2007) who provided a comparison of academic, workplace, and community mentoring with other types of interpersonal relationships on a number of relational dimensions. We propose three core attributes of workplace mentoring that should be taken into account by researchers—core attributes that distinguish mentoring from other kinds of work-related relationships. These core attributes are *reciprocity*, *developmental benefits*, and *regular/consistent interaction* over some period of time.

First, mentoring requires a *reciprocal* relationship, involving mutuality of social exchange as opposed to a one-way relationship. This relationship could take a variety of forms (e.g., formal/informal, peer, supervisory) and interaction modalities, including face-to-face, telephone, and even virtual (e.g., online, e-mail) relationships. The requirement of reciprocity and mutual exchange eliminates as a mentor, for example, a role model who is one's CEO, a celebrity, or historical figure with whom there is no reciprocal relationship. In addition, the reciprocity

Table 2
Information Researchers Should Collect about Primary Mentoring Relationships

Mentor specific
Location in the organizational hierarchy
Gender and racial/ethnic identity
Career stage
Supervisory or nonsupervisory relationship to protégé
Inside or outside the protégé's organization
Protégé specific
Location in the organizational hierarchy
Gender and racial/ethnic identity
Career stage (e.g., duration of career)
Relationship specific
Formal or informal
Relationship duration
Age differential of mentor and protégé
Who initiated the relationship (protégé, mentor, or organization)
Closeness/quality of the relationship

requirement would eliminate many (but not all) relationships with coaches, supervisors, advisors, and teachers because of a lack of tangible reciprocity in the relationship (see Eby et al., 2007).

Second, a mentoring relationship produces *developmental benefits* linked to the protégé's work and/or career. These benefits are often lasting benefits that go beyond strictly job-related skills or protégé benefits required by the organization. In addition, although the primary goal is protégé development, mentors often do benefit from these relationships, such that mentoring has been deemed a "learning partnership" (Eby et al., 2007), a notion that underscores both the reciprocal and the developmental components of workplace mentoring.

Third, although mentoring relationships vary in level of commitment, intensity, and duration, mentoring involves *regular/consistent interaction* between the mentor and the protégé over some period of time and typically has a longer term nature than other relationships such as coaching or advising relationships.

We next offer recommendations for how researchers can effectively conceptualize the construct, taking into account different forms of mentoring. We recommend that researchers ask research participants about the existence of a general mentoring relationship—that is, one characterized by reciprocity, developmental benefits, and regular/consistent interaction. A brief definition incorporating the key attributes of mentoring can then be followed by systematic collection of additional information about the mentor, the protégé, and the relationship (see Table 2).

This additional information will provide clarity about the nature of the particular mentoring relationship and also will provide potential control variables for analysis of how mentoring relates to other variables, such as career outcomes. For example, as displayed in Table 2, researchers should ask about *mentor-specific* information, such as the mentor's hierarchical location, gender/ethnic identity, and career stage. Second, *protégé-specific* information is needed, similar to that for mentors. Finally, *relationship-specific* information is needed for a full

delineation of mentoring. Examples include relationship initiation, duration, age differential, and closeness/quality of relationship. Collectively, the additional information can assist in the goal of building a more precise cumulative knowledge of mentoring.

Our discussion in this section has called attention to the variability in mentor definitions and how this variability might influence mentoring outcomes. We highlighted three fundamental attributes in defining the mentoring construct as well as boundary condition information we think is highly relevant to providing needed clarity on the effects of mentors and mentoring. In the next sections we shift our focus to recommendations for future research with particular attention to developing (and continuing) research trends. We address a number of topics that show promise as sources of new insights into the mentoring relationship.

Developing/Continuing Research Trends

As noted by various scholars, and as emphasized throughout our article, the conceptualization of mentoring and of mentoring relationships has evolved notably during the past 25 to 30 years (Eby et al., 2007; Kram & Ragins, 2007; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003). For example, Kram and Ragins (2007: 663) stated in their review of the mentoring literature, "We have moved forward from the study of a single mentoring relationship to the study of a range of relationships that offer developmental assistance at various points in individuals' lives and careers." Throughout the article, we have underscored specific issues for researchers to consider in terms of the benefits and drawbacks of expanding the construct of mentoring. In this section, we discuss some relatively new mentoring trends and suggest areas for future research. Note, however, that although some of our suggestions for future research follow directly from our prior review of the literature, other suggestions are based on our overall reflections about the mentoring area. Nonetheless, the mentoring phenomena we discuss include our three "core attributes" for a mentoring relationship—reciprocity, developmental benefits, and regular/consistent interaction. Finally, we want to highlight that what are called mentoring functions may be provided by individuals who are not "traditional" mentors (i.e., 8–15 years older and one to two levels higher in the organizational hierarchy).

Mentoring Across Occupational Settings

An important consideration for mentoring is the occupational setting or context in which the relationship takes place and how the context might influence mentoring relationships and their outcomes. As indicated by our review of the mentoring literature, most scholars emphasize career-related functions in the definitions they use to describe mentors as well as career focused outcomes. Examples include career attainment (salary and promotions) and perceived career success (Turban & Dougherty, 1994), career advancement aspirations (Allen, Potet, & Russell, 2000), career motivation (consists of career resilience, career insight, and career identity; Day & Allen, 2004), career encouragement (Tharenou, 2001), and perceived employment alternatives (Baugh et al., 1996). Although considerable attention has been paid

to career outcomes, very little attention has been paid to constraints operating in the actual careers or occupations of mentors and protégés. In fact, in our review we did not identify any articles dealing with the issue of job/professional context and mentoring.

Since career success is an important outcome in an investigation of mentoring, one might expect that protégés work in occupations and settings with considerable opportunity for promotions. Stated differently, we would assume the existence of career ladders for protégés. We suspect, however, that certain occupations and work settings provide abundant opportunities for upward mobility, while others pose more constraints on mobility. Occupations reported in the studies examined here included accountants, engineers, university administrators, lawyers, nurses, physicians, medical technicians, social workers, journalists, military personnel, and corporate executives. Although executives and lawyers might have distinct career ladders, we wonder whether nurses, medical technicians, and social workers are typically employed in work contexts allowing ample opportunities for upward career progress. In addition, individuals in managerial and professional positions in private sector firms might have more opportunities for upward mobility than nonexempt employees in these firms.

More broadly, the question arises regarding the extent that the type and level of mentoring functions provided vary across different occupations and settings. It seems likely that the meaning of mentoring varies across the occupations and settings studied—an issue that has not been extensively discussed by mentoring researchers. We encourage researchers to consider how occupations and settings may affect the research questions investigated. For example, there may be certain occupations and settings in which it would be inappropriate to discuss traditional mentoring relationships, although the term *developmental relationships* may be perfectly appropriate.

Our point here is to suggest that mentoring researchers engage in a more explicit discussion of how contextual factors such as occupations and settings in their studies might influence their findings (see Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, & Wiethoff, 2010). These contextual factors may be relevant for the meaning participants attach to the construct of mentoring and also for the nature of the mentoring experience for both protégés and mentors. More broadly, factors such as settings and occupations can also serve as constraints on key behaviors with implications for the generalizability of results.

Developmental Networks

Although Kram (1985) discussed a “constellation of relationships,” Higgins and Kram (2001) later provided a strong impetus for research examining developmental networks. In particular, Higgins and Kram argued that individuals receive mentoring assistance from numerous individuals at any one point in time and that our understanding of developmental assistance would be enhanced by examining the network of developers. In general, researchers interested in developmental network use a “name-generator” technique in which they ask respondents (egos) to identify individuals who meet some definition/characteristic (e.g., “people who take an active interest in and concerted effort to advance your career,” Higgins, Dobrow, & Chandler, 2008; “people who have acted to help your career by . . .,” Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Researchers typically then either ask respondents about relationships

among the individuals listed to create an ego-centric network and/or ask questions about the developmental assistance provided by the developers. The methods used in research on developmental networks could provide an excellent opportunity to identify and test the validity of the various types of distinctions in mentoring characteristics and boundary conditions that we have highlighted.

In general, evidence indicates that developmental networks can provide value to individuals beyond the primary mentoring relationship (Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Research examining developmental networks can expand our understanding of how developmental relationships influence individuals' work and life experiences. For example, Dobrow and Higgins (2005) found that the density of the developmental network was negatively related to professional identity, presumably because individuals had less access to nonredundant resources with greater density. Higgins et al. (2008) found that although mentoring support from one's entire developmental network was related to self-efficacy and perceived career success, individuals who received more mentoring support from developers or peers from graduate school reported lower perceived career success. Such findings extend mentoring research by showing that the structure of developmental networks is an important influence on success such that mentoring support from certain types of individuals is more valuable than support from other types. This finding further highlights the importance of researchers explicitly specifying and describing the type of relationship being investigated since not all developmental relationships are equally beneficial. Furthermore, the findings suggest that developmental relationships can have both positive and negative outcomes for participants.

Relational Problems

As noted by various authors, mentoring relationships fall along a continuum from very effective to very ineffective and even dysfunctional (e.g., Eby et al., 2000; Eby & McManus, 2004; Ragins et al., 2000; Scandura, 1998). Nonetheless, most mentoring research examines benefits, not problems, in mentoring relationships. Fortunately, however, scholars have continued to pursue what Eby (2007: 324) called "relational problems" in mentoring relationships: "real or perceived aspects of mentor-protégé interactions that minimize, negate, or undermine the personal or professional growth of one or both members." In general, evidence indicates that protégés and mentors can experience both costs and benefits in mentoring relationships (see Eby, 2007, for a review of this literature), although the mechanisms leading to such outcomes are less clear.

In an attempt to spur research examining possible mechanisms, Eby (2007) proposed an investment model of mentoring relationships that proposed that "mentoring episodes" (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007) influence both mentor and protégé perceptions of costs and benefits of the relationship, which in turn influence attitudes and behaviors of each party. Since mentoring episodes probably vary depending on characteristics of the relationships, such that peer relationships, supervisory mentor relationships, and traditional mentoring relationships lead to different types of interactions, we expect that relational problems differ across these types of relationships. More broadly, Turban and Lee (2007) suggested that personality characteristics of protégés and mentors influence the extent of positive and negative mentoring

experiences in the relationships, although the importance of personality may vary across types of relationships. In any case, we expect that the scales developed by Eby and colleagues to measure both protégé (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004) and mentor (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2008) perceptions of negative mentoring experiences will help advance our understanding of this issue. There are many areas worth pursuing to understand negative mentoring experiences, and scholars should continue to utilize theories of close interpersonal relationships to understand relational problems in developmental relationships.

Electronic/E-Mentoring

Electronic mentoring, which has been available for only the past 15 or so years, is the use of technology to foster developmental relationships. In their review, Ensher and Murphy (2007: 300) defined e-mentoring as “a mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé, which provides new learning as well as career and emotional support, primarily through e-mail and other electronic means (e.g., instant messaging, chat rooms, social networking spaces, etc.)” They note that e-mentoring falls along a continuum in which parties communicate only electronically, communicate primarily through electronic means, or use electronic methods of communication to supplement face-to-face mentoring (Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003). Scholars have proposed various advantages to e-mentoring, including (but not limited to) access to a greater number of mentors, greater flexibility in forming and sustaining relationships, and reduction of demographic and personality barriers in traditional mentoring (Ensher & Murphy, 2007; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003). Of course, scholars also have recognized disadvantages of e-mentoring—increased likelihood of miscommunication, slower development of relationships, variability in written communication skills, and discomfort with technology (Ensher & Murphy, 2007; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003).

One area in which scholars agree is the need for research as there are few empirical studies examining e-mentoring (Ensher et al., 2003; Ensher & Murphy, 2007; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Noe et al., 2002). An important question is whether one can form a mentoring relationship solely using electronic forms of communication. Clearly, electronic forms of communication can supplement traditional forms of communication. We also believe that some mentoring functions can be communicated solely using electronic means (for an extended discussion of these issues see Ensher et al., 2003; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003). Furthermore, it seems possible that developmental relationships (a construct broader than mentoring) can be developed and sustained through electronic forms of communication. An example of the potential value of e-mentoring is provided in a case study examining an e-mentoring program for professional women in the United Kingdom (Headlam-Wells, Gosland, & Craig, 2005). More recently, a study of a peer-mentoring program for college students found that mentored students received less psychosocial and career support via electronic means compared to face-to-face communication, although mentor gender moderated some of the results (Smith-Jentsch, Scielzo, Yarborough, & Rosopa, 2008). Given technological changes, social networking sites, and so on, we expect that the amount of electronic mentoring will continue to increase and deserves researchers' attention. In these efforts, we urge researchers to keep in mind the continuum of the extent of electronic communication (Ensher et al., 2003).

Mentor Perspective

Although a mentoring relationship typically is conceptualized as a mutually beneficial relationship involving reciprocity between the mentor and protégé, the overwhelming majority of research has examined outcomes for protégés rather than mentors (Allen, 2007). Thus, we know much more about protégé mentoring experiences than we do about mentor experiences. As we noted earlier, researchers first began to consider the mentor perspective during the early 1990s. In more recent years researchers have continued to try to understand how mentoring, or developmental relationships, influence the mentor (Allen, 2007; Lentz & Allen, 2009). In this vein, several studies have investigated predictors of willingness to mentor others (for a review, see Allen, 2007), although we know little about predictors of actual mentor experiences.

Mentor motivation. An important area for research is a mentor's motivation for engaging in a mentoring relationship, which should influence the mentor's interactions with the protégé. For example, evidence suggests that motives to mentor others include self-enhancement, the desire to benefit others, and intrinsic satisfaction (Allen, 2003; Allen, Poteet, et al., 1997). Furthermore, mentor motives were related to mentor reports of mentor functions provided to protégés (Allen, 2003), although additional research is needed using cross-dyadic perceptions (i.e., relating mentor reports of motives to protégé reports of mentoring received). We encourage researchers to draw from self-determination theory (see Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge, 2003) when examining both protégé and mentor motives for engaging in a mentoring relationship. Specifically, considerable evidence from self-determination theory indicates that motivation to engage in an activity varies along a continuum from internally to externally motivated and that internally motivated activities typically result in more positive outcomes than do externally motivated outcomes (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Notably, the mentor motives identified by Allen (2003)—self-enhancement, benefitting others, and intrinsic satisfaction—appear to vary along the extrinsic–intrinsic continuum. We urge researchers to continue investigating both mentor and protégé motives for engaging in mentoring relationships and providing mentoring functions. It seems likely that the motives for providing mentoring may differ for peers, supervisors, and traditional mentors. Furthermore, based on the findings that mismatches and unmet expectations can negatively influence mentoring relationships (Eby et al., 2004; Young & Perrewé, 2004), researchers might examine the concordance (or discordance) of mentor and protégé motivations for engaging in a mentoring relationship.

We also suggest that conceptualizing the mentor role as extrarole behavior might provide considerable insight into reasons for forming a mentoring relationship. For example, Allen (2003) conceptualized mentoring others as a prosocial activity and drew on the prosocial personality literature to develop hypotheses about willingness to mentor others. More broadly, evidence indicates that individuals are more likely to engage in citizenship behaviors when such behaviors are seen as part of their role (e.g., Kamdar, McAllister, & Turban, 2006; Tepper, Lockhart, & Hoobler, 2001). By extension, it seems likely that managers may be more likely to provide mentoring functions, and perhaps engage in a mentoring relationship, when they see such activities as part of their role. Thus, supervisors who see mentoring

functions as an aspect of the supervisory role are more likely to provide such functions than are supervisors who do not see such functions as part of the role. How role definitions are formed, however, is an area for future research. Nonetheless, considerable research has examined predictors of extrarole behaviors (see meta-analyses by LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002; Organ & Ryan, 1995), and such evidence may be utilized to better understand factors related to willingness to form a mentoring relationship.

Reverse mentoring and learning. A relatively new phenomenon is what is called “reverse mentoring” (Greengard, 2002). In general, reverse mentoring, although also a reciprocal relationship, is formed with the intent that the protégé provide developmental assistance to the mentor, usually involving the use of technology and/or the sharing of information and knowledge. It is not uncommon for young, well-educated entry-level workers to have more knowledge about technology than their managers (Greengard, 2002; Harvey & Buckley, 2002); therefore, organizations have developed reverse mentoring programs that pair junior managers with knowledge in a specific area with a senior manager who would benefit from such knowledge. Although many of the programs described in the literature are formal programs, it seems likely that such relationships can develop informally also. For example, a study examining age diversity in mentor relationships found that in approximately 10% of the relationships the mentor was younger than the protégé (Finkelstein, Allen, & Rhoton, 2003). We expect that reverse mentoring relationships may become more common given the flatness of organizational structures and changes in where and how work is accomplished. Clearly, this is an area in which research is needed, as we know very little about the benefits of mentoring relationships for the mentor.

Learning and Information Sharing

Although mentoring has been recognized as a mechanism for the transfer of knowledge (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001), very little research has investigated exactly what type of information is transferred and/or how the information is transferred in mentoring relationships. As noted by Lankau and Scandura (2007), limited research has examined mentoring and learning, which is particularly noteworthy since mentoring relationships are theorized to help both protégé and mentors grow, learn, and develop. Although some of the mentoring functions appear to deal directly with learning, such as coaching and role modeling, there is little evidence about what type of knowledge is best learned from mentoring relationships. This seems to be a promising area for future research, in particular if one assumes that in some cases protégés have greater technical skills than do mentors, leading to the question of how mentors learn from protégés. For example, what types of mentoring relationships result in the greatest learning from both partners? Are protégés with certain characteristics more likely to help mentors learn? Some evidence suggests that mentoring received is related to personal learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002) and to reduced role ambiguity and conflict, which can be conceptualized as indicators of job and organizational knowledge (Lankau, Carlson, & Nielson, 2006). Nonetheless, as noted more than 10 years ago (Mullen & Noe, 1999), we need research to examine information sharing and the learning and development of both the protégé and the mentor.

In addition to the dearth of research investigating learning outcomes, although the topic of personal growth and change is essential to mentoring, these processes have received very little attention (Kram & Ragins, 2007). Presumably, both mentors and protégés grow from a mentoring relationship, although it seems likely that different types of mentoring relationships result in different types of personal growth and change. In addition to career success outcomes, we urge researchers to examine personal learning, personal skill development, personal identity growth, and personal adaptability (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram & Ragins, 2007; Lankau & Scandura, 2007) from both the protégé and mentor perspectives. Such variables will provide considerable insight into how such developmental relationships enhance the well-being of the participants.

Conclusion

Our review has provided an overview of how researchers have investigated—and especially how they have defined—the construct of mentoring over a period of almost 30 years. Scholars have examined a broad array of research questions in generating a large cumulative literature of mentoring. In pursuing this work, researchers performed both quantitative and qualitative research, used (mostly) cross-sectional surveys, but also experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and collected data from a wide variety of samples and settings. Our review focused on delineating the landscape of mentoring definitions used by scholars. We observed a range of specificity of mentoring definitions from broad and vague to highly restrictive and specific, and we suggested how various kinds of definitions likely play a role in research findings. We also discussed the relevance of boundary conditions in mentoring definitions, including the mentor's position in the organizational hierarchy, mentor's supervisory or nonsupervisory role, inside versus outside the firm mentors, and level of relationship intimacy.

We emphasized that we do not believe it is possible, or even desirable, for all researchers to agree on one specific, comprehensive definition of mentoring. However, we do believe there are a few key attributes of all workplace mentoring relationships. These core attributes distinguish mentoring from other kinds of interpersonal relationships. We have delineated these key attributes and provided some examples. We also offer specific suggestions as to additional follow-up information researchers should collect when studying particular mentoring relationships (see Table 2). We encourage researchers to consider how contextual factors such as occupations and work settings might constrain both the construct of mentoring and the experience of mentoring relationships for protégés and mentors. Finally, we have provided our observations of not only the past progression but also developing trends in mentoring research. We hope that our analysis and observations will be helpful to future scholars who pursue these important research questions.

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