



Article

Where next with research in mentoring?

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Prof David Clutterbuck
Coaching and Mentoring International Ltd
Woodlands, Tollgate,
Maidenhead,
Berks, UK. SL6 4LJ

www.coachingandmentoringinternational.org
e-mail: info@coachingandmentoringinternational.org
Company registration number : 08158710

Section 1: in mentoring?

Where next with research

It would be easy to conclude, from the vast numbers of research papers and studies on mentoring, that the field is pretty well covered. In practice, that's far from the truth. It's noticeable, for example, that there are far more quantitative studies than qualitative. (The opposite is the case for the parallel field of coaching.) There is hardly any that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. Moreover, mentoring isn't a single, readily classifiable phenomenon or set of activities. When Kathy Kram did her first, small sample study 30 years ago, she looked at a specific aspect of mentoring (informal, unsupported) in a specific culture (the USA). But the kaleidoscope of mentoring is constantly changing. Across the world, the word mentoring has many meanings, most if not all valid within their context.

A truism often forgotten by academics is that the intent of research is not just about their achieving tenure; it is about establishing knowledge that will have practical application. For a long time, the reputation of academic research was not helped by the divergence between the conclusions of academic papers and practitioner experience in the field, with regard to the relative merits of formal versus informal mentoring. This divergence was at least partially the result of failings in the structure and definition of much of the research, by both academics and practitioners – in particular, simplistic assumptions about what success looks like, and for whom, how many frogs a mentee seeking an informal mentoring relationship has to kiss before they find a prince, and what are the differences between formal and informal arrangements.

Several years ago, I proposed five tests for mentoring research, based on the analyses I had had to make in my own studies. The descriptions below are taken from my article in the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching* (2003).

1. *Definition Is it clear what kind of relationship is being measured? Some research mixes participants in structured programmes with those in informal relationships and some even with relationships, where one party does not realise they are part of a mentoring duo. Some papers mix in-line relationships with off-line (leaving aside the argument as to whether it is possible to be a mentor in a boss-subordinate relationship).*

There are, of course, dozens of definitions of mentoring, yet many studies fail to be precise about which definition they are following. Many, mainly US-originated definitions, emphasises sponsorship and hands-on help by the mentor; others, mostly European and Australian in origin, see such behaviours as unacceptable within the mentor role. Unless it is clear, which model is being followed in a particular piece of research, it is often impossible to draw conclusions with confidence, or to make comparisons with other studies. Meta-studies and literature reviews may compound the problem, because they tend to begin from the (false) assumption that everyone is measuring the same phenomenon.

The issue is made even more complex by the recognition by some researchers in the area that multiple, simultaneous mentoring relationships are also a common factor. Clearly, the dynamics of one relationship within a web of others may be different from those of a single, intensive mentoring dyad.

To increase the validity of research in mentoring, it is necessary in my view to provide a precise definition of exactly what kind of relationship is being measured and to ensure that all the samples lie within that definition. Some research has attempted to get round this problem by asking people about broad helping relationships, but then the data is too general to apply meaningfully to specific types of mentoring relationship. Recognising that mentoring is a class of phenomena and that each phenomenon needs to be investigated in its own right, would be a major step forward in research quality in this field. (An interesting analogy is in the field of medical research, specifically into the origins of autism. Almost no progress towards an understanding of this condition had been made until recently, when researchers began to recognise it as a number of related and interacting sub-conditions.)

- 2. Context A wide variety of contextual actors can affect the relationship and the scheme. At a minimum, these will impact upon the intent (their own or that of third parties, such as the organisation) mentor and mentee bring to the relationship.*

Other contextual variables include the level of training participants receive, the way in which they are matched (with or without an element of choice) and whether the relationship is supported as it develops (for example, by additional sources of learning and/or advice). Other contextual factors might include differences in race, age or gender.

Trying to account for all the contextual variables that might apply, especially when a research sample is drawn from many organisations or schemes would be very difficult to do without vast sample sizes. This suggests the need for relatively narrow selection criteria – for example, senior managers, in company-sponsored mentoring relationships of at least six months duration with a paid external, professional mentor; or young males 12- 15 from deprived backgrounds at risk, paired with male role models between 10 and 20 years older. The more variables subsequently introduced (eg gender variation), the larger the sample size will need to be to draw conclusions with confidence.

- 3. Process provides another set of variables. It is clear, for example, that e-mentoring differs in some fundamental aspects from traditional face-to-face mentoring. Simple process factors, such as frequency of meeting, can have a major impact on outcomes. At the very least, studies need to allow for or try to eliminate such variables. Studies attempting to link personality to success of mentoring relationships, for example, would be better grounded if they also*

investigated the degree, to which personality factors resulted in specific behaviours, perceived as helpful or unhelpful to the maintenance of the relationship and to the achievement of its goals. (This classification into maintenance and achievement oriented behaviours appears to be very relevant across the whole area of mentoring relationship dynamics.)

4. *Outcomes Much of the research literature uses Kram's functions of a mentor (or the subsequent recasting of the functions by Noe, 1988) as measures of outcomes. Yet the functions are a mixture of behaviours, enablers and outcomes and so for the most part unsuitable for this use. Moreover, outcomes are almost never related back to goals/ intent. The reality is that different types of mentoring relationship have different expectations of outcomes; and even different dyads within the same scheme. Failure to recognise these means that the purpose of the relationship is ignored – which suggests the research fails the fifth test, that of relevance.*

It is also remarkable how few studies attempt to measure outcomes for both parties. Yet mentoring is an interaction between two partners, with the outcomes highly dependent on the motivation of both.

5. *Relevance The so-what test is a standard element in guidance on research design, but it seems often to be honoured mostly in the breach. My own experience has been that I struggled to get co-operation from companies until I was able to articulate very clearly the practical value both of the expected research outcomes and of participating in the research process itself. Even then, maintaining commitment for a longitudinal study has proven very difficult. I recommend anyone designing future studies to convene at any early stage of research design a panel of practitioners – those, who the research is intended to inform and benefit – to help shape and ground the project.*

The years later these tests still seem highly relevant. Many of the articles I am asked to review for various journals fail on at least one. Perhaps the most recurrent problem is that people tend to see their particular perspective on mentoring as the only one or the “right” one.

If I were to try to define an “ideal” research paper in this field, it would have the following characteristics:

- Arising out of a specific need to know, from the field (e.g. what works best in terms of approaches to matching, in what contexts?)
- Clarity about the type, style and context of the relationships or programme being measured
- A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, so that each can enrich and inform the others
- A deep questioning of previous research – just how valid is it?
- A deep questioning of instruments – do they measure what they purport to? Have they been adequately tested on the specific phenomenon being measured in this research? Are there contextual variables that might influence the validity of these instruments in this application?

- Based in a truly international perspective and literature base (not just US or European)

In short, I'm arguing for rigour and innovation at the conceptual level, as well as in methodology. One way to achieve this is to encourage research partnerships – academics and programme managers within organisations working together to define and implement studies that meet a wider range of informational needs. At the very least, every academic researcher needs a practitioner mentor!

Researchers, who take this approach, can make a major contribution to some of the burning and under-researched issues on the mentoring agenda. These include:

- The dynamics of multi-cultural, multi-country mentoring programmes – for example, how do you balance consistency with local adaptation?
- Managing endings in mentoring – it's now a decade since David Megginson and I did a broad-brush examination of this and our results have never been retested
- The rising phenomenon of professional supervision for mentors
- Meta-models of mentoring. Sponsorship and developmental mentoring, or transactional and relational mentoring are separate but overlapping constructs. In many cultures, they are used in different combinations.
- Mentee competencies. (For example, how can we help people with few social skills and poor communication skills be more effective in their roles as mentees?)
- Training of mentoring programme managers – what lessons can be learned from experience?

These topics are just the tip of the iceberg. I believe that we are now entering a new era of mentoring research, which is inclusive of and values diversity in approach and concept and where the predominant aim is to bring about positive change in workplaces and society. I am highly excited, for example, to be involved in what appears to be the first programmes of ethical mentoring – where mentors become the moral guardians and support in areas of ethical complexity. I can already see the beginnings of a research design!

Bibliography

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