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The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice, by Belle Rose Ragins and Kathy E. Kram

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The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice.

Belle Rose Ragins and Kathy E. Kram, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007. 745 pp. \$125.00.

It has been 30 years since Daniel Levinson (1978: 97) wrote, "The mentor relationship is one of the most complex, and developmentally important, a [person] can have in early adulthood." As this new handbook demonstrates, researchers are still convinced of its importance and still trying to tease apart its complexity. Following Levinson, Kathy Kram provided a cogent agenda for academic research with her *Mentoring at Work* (1985). She identified antecedents and outcomes to mentoring, delineated key functions (career, psychosocial), emphasized the complexities of cross-gender relationships, and noted that mentoring relationships are often characterized by phases. Researchers found much to like in Kram's study, and since its publication, research in mentoring has enlarged, honed, and enlivened the construct.

The *Handbook* presents a summary of 30 years of mentoring research and provides a road map for further theorizing and inquiry. Its purpose is lofty: to provide "the definitive reference book on mentoring relationships" (p. 12). In large part, it succeeds at this goal. While this compendium adds at least four new critical insights to mentoring research, the basic findings remain the same. First, mentoring tends to work. Though strong, effective mentoring relationships remain elusive for many employees, having someone to help navigate organizational life as coach, guide, and role model tends to be a good thing. It helps the protégé and it helps the mentor. Second, mentoring is undertaken for well-known purposes, including to get ahead in one's career and to have someone to relate to emotionally. Thus Kram's primary functions remain intact, with the possible addition of role modeling as a separate function (see Scandura, 1992).

Third, the theoretical and practical boundaries of the mentoring construct remain highly permeable. Though the attributes of the "traditional" mentoring relationship—between a wise older mentor and a younger protégé—have been fairly well identified, the *Handbook* repeatedly emphasizes that this relationship is not where the action is. The traditional relationship, based inexorably on an outmoded hierarchical model, doesn't work well in turbulent environments, in which mobility makes long-term relationships less likely, and it also doesn't work well with people who do not match many of the key characteristics of the dominant group. The traditional relationship assumes that the protégé would like to increase similarity with the mentor, but what about relationships in which the protégé would rather learn lessons from the mentor but has little interest in becoming more like him or her? These are among the many questions being teased out in this summary of the burgeoning research on mentoring.

The book is organized into five parts. Part 1 is an overview by Ragins and Kram on "the roots and meaning of mentoring." Using the metaphor of a garden, the editors view the *Handbook* as offering a review of the current state of the field, an opportunity to introduce new theory, and a collection of

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advice for practitioners culled from experiences with mentoring programs. A meander through this handbook tends to reveal that the garden that began as a small plant carefully watered by Kram has grown into something of a backyard maze of well-ordered shrubs threatened by tangles of weedy brambles, but hacking through this underbrush is largely worth it.

Part 2 summarizes current mentoring research. Turban and Lee analyze the role of personality in mentoring relationships, arguing that a matching process between the personalities of mentor and protégé is essential to effective relationships. A well-documented chapter by Dougherty and Dreher notes how conceptual and methodological problems may be hindering the progress of mentoring research. In compiling results for a meta-analysis of mentoring outcomes, for example, they found that in 47 studies, one-third of the studies developed a unique mentoring scale. When respondents were asked whether they “currently have a mentor,” those replying in the affirmative ranged from 23 to 81 percent, “a likely result of differing mentoring definitions and/or sample characteristics” (p. 75).

The next four chapters provide linkages between mentoring and other organizational behavior constructs, including learning (Lankau and Scandura), leadership (Godshalk and Sosik), and organizational socialization (Chao). Godshalk and Sosik’s chapter responds to Dougherty and Dreher’s concern about the mentoring construct’s definitional muddiness; the authors carefully outline the distinctions and overlaps between developmental leadership and mentoring, including the relationship form and type, functions offered, and benefits received. Allen then addresses a gap in the literature, accentuated repeatedly in the *Handbook*, that the majority of studies focus on mentoring relationships from the protégé’s point of view rather than the mentor’s. She cogently summarizes the small but growing set of studies on the willingness to mentor others, protégé selection, characteristics of an effective mentor, and outcomes associated with mentoring others.

Two chapters focus on gender (McKeen and Bujaki) and race (Blake-Beard, Murrell, and Thomas) in mentoring relationships. These excellent chapters develop a critique both of the concept of traditional mentoring, which leaves too many people out, and a critique of the way research on mentoring has been done, assuming too often that traditional mentoring is what everybody wants. They draw our attention to two essential ideas on mentoring research. First, organizational context must be taken into account. Without understanding how mentoring relationships are nested within organizational cultures largely based on masculine career models, the findings of mentoring studies cannot be realistically interpreted. Second, too often the effectiveness of mentoring for people of color has been based on whether there is assimilation to the dominant white/male model.

The final four chapters in part 2 refine key aspects of the mentoring construct, including formal versus informal mentoring

(Baugh and Fagenson-Eland), peer mentoring (McManus and Russell), and relational problems—an examination of when mentoring goes bad (Eby). A useful chapter by Ensher and Murphy outlines the usefulness and potential pitfalls of “e-mentoring,” mentoring conducted through computer-mediated means of e-mailing, chat rooms, newsgroups, mailing lists, interactive Web sites, and blogs.

The eight chapters in part 3 provide “new lenses and perspectives” on mentoring theory. These chapters read something like a Rorschach test, wherein the mentoring construct—which is admittedly inkblot-like—is viewed through differing frames of reference, sometimes providing more insight into the frame of reference than the construct under study. But out of this theorizing four key themes emerge that help to move the literature in important new directions. The first is the transformation into developmental networks of Kram’s (1985) notion of mentors as constellations of developmental relationships. In an earlier article, Higgins and Kram (2001) applied the apparatus of social network theory to mentoring, suggesting that these relationships can be characterized structurally by their diversity and strength of network ties. Here, a chapter by Higgins, Chandler, and Kram adds a third dimension, called developmental initiation, depicting individuals’ development-seeking behaviors. Applying network theory to mentoring makes sense from a theoretical perspective and adds a rigorous method to the mentoring researcher’s expanding toolkit.

The second key theme develops the idea of relational mentoring, a construct inspired by positive psychology (e.g., Dutton and Ragins, 2007). This construct, aimed at deconstructing the traditional model, suggests that mentoring is best conceived as a reciprocal, interdependent process, rather than a top-down hierarchical one. One result of this emphasis is that the outcomes of mentoring should be reconceived not only as the instrumental aspects typically examined, such as career achievement and promotion, but also as developmental outcomes, including enhanced connections to others, a zest for learning, and acquiring relational skills and competencies. These themes are developed in two illuminating chapters by McGowan, Stone, and Kegan, who develop “a constructive-developmental approach,” and Fletcher and Ragins. The latter chapter also provides two other critical ideas. The first is the suggestion that mentoring should be studied in terms of developmental “mentoring episodes” rather than as all-encompassing relationships. This approach, which has both theoretical and methodological implications, has real potential for helping researchers to characterize more accurately the dynamic and fluid nature of mentoring. The second idea is to examine the elements of “high quality” mentoring and, in that process, to distinguish mentoring relationships along a continuum from high quality to average to marginal to dysfunctional.

The third key theme, reflecting a trend in organizational behavior more generally, is that emotions are important in mentoring. This is long overdue and well represented in chapters by Cherniss, on emotional intelligence in mentoring, and Boyatzis, on the necessity of compassion to mentoring

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relationships. The final key theme is learning and the recognition that learning needs change throughout careers. Hall and Chandler argue that careers are characterized by ever-shorter learning cycles that produce skills that researchers are unaccustomed to measuring, such as self-awareness, self-confidence, psychological success, identity growth, and adaptability.

Part 4 outlines how mentoring programs have been effectively implemented in organizations, providing on-the-ground illustrations focused on how to structure successful formal mentoring. This section is followed by an excellent integration chapter by Kram and Ragins assessing the preceding wide-ranging studies and offering a useful graphic of “new horizons” for research. Just when we thought this literature was a hopelessly impermeable jungle, the editors restore a semblance of a garden’s neat rows.

As with most edited books, this one has its share of pluses and minuses. On the plus side, the *Handbook* delivers on its promise to provide “a definitive reference.” Its scope is wide but generally appropriate to its vision, and unlike some handbooks, there is substantial cross-referencing within the chapters. And the introductory and concluding chapters are excellent. On the minus side, there is considerable repetition between the chapters. The definitional background of Kram’s research is cited in the majority of the chapters, along with the obligatory calls for more longitudinal research, research focused on the mentor’s perspective, and research better capturing relationship dynamics. The individual chapters are arguably too long, with most providing extensive literature reviews, propositions, and arrow-and-box models requiring extensive explanation. Casual inquirers on mentoring would do well to read the first and last chapters, then cherry-pick those between that look interesting. Doctoral students will find that the *Handbook* provides a rich summary of extant studies and terrific ideas for future research. Mentoring researchers will find this a vital book to have on the shelf. They should get a shovel and rake and enjoy puttering around in this variegated garden.

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