The intent of this commentary is to illustrate how some of the ideas discussed in Weiss and Rupp (2011) can be applied to the study of mentoring relationships. Mentoring has been defined as a developmental relationship between an individual (protégé) and a more senior and influential individual (mentor; Dreher & Cox, 1996). Mentoring is touted as a popular tool for employee development within organizations as well as a key means by which individuals achieve personal and career development across the life span (Allen & Eby, 2007). Mentoring relationships have been associated with a variety of beneficial outcomes for protégés (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). But what makes some workplace mentoring relationships more effective and meaningful than others? Our view is that despite several decades of research and hundreds of articles, we know little about the mechanisms that give rise to effective and individually transformative mentoring. This lack of knowledge can be attributed, at least in part, to a reliance on the prevailing research paradigm that Weiss and Rupp describe.

Current Mentoring Research Paradigm

A key question in the literature is how to develop and promote effective mentoring relationships. There are several different ways that effectiveness is inferred in the literature. Much of this research centers on what is called “mentoring functions.” On the basis of the work by Kram (1985), a mentoring relationship is characterized by the provision of two functions between mentor and protégé, career and psychosocial. Career functions are aspects of the mentoring relationship that prepare the protégé for advancement, whereas psychosocial mentoring functions are those that enhance the protégé’s sense of competence, clarity of identity, and effectiveness. In mentoring research, participants are commonly asked to respond to questions such as, “My mentor takes a personal interest in my career,” and “My mentor has encouraged me to prepare for advancement” as a way of assessing if career and psychosocial mentoring has occurred. An effective relationship could be considered as one in which positive outcomes are achieved, demonstrated by correlating a measure of mentoring functions received by the protégé with measures of protégé outcomes such as career success and job attitudes (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). An effective mentoring relationship might also be construed...
as one that participants (mentor or protégé) report as being of high quality and/or satisfying (Allen & Eby, 2003; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000) or as one absent of negative mentoring experiences (Eby, 2007).

This research approach fits squarely with the “between-entities assumption” described by Weiss and Rupp. First, indicators of mentoring effectiveness are conceptualized “as properties of people.” Person A has the qualities of being a satisfied protégé but Person B does not. Person C received career support but Person D did not. Although this approach has generated a great deal of knowledge regarding mentoring relationships, this focus inhibits our ability to understand how each individual actually experiences and perceives mentoring continuously as it occurs, with all the potential emotional ups and downs that are a feature of any meaningful relationship. Second, the vast majority of mentoring research is based on cross-sectional, between-subject research designs (Allen, Eby, O’Brien, & Lentz, 2008). Data are typically based on self-reported retrospective accounts of relationships. Distinctions between relationships that have taken place many years ago versus those recently developed are rarely made. The relationships as investigated are typically assumed to be stable when real experience tells us that mentoring relationships are dynamic and that the evaluation of the relationship retrospectively is likely to produce a different result from one done in the moment.

Affect plays a key role in the person-centric approach Weiss and Rupp describe. We suspect that much of what we have been studying in mentoring relationships is affect, but we do not recognize it as such. That is, when protégés report on experiences such as the extent that mentoring was provided to them or whether or not their mentors took advantage of them in some way, what the data really reflect is an overall affective reaction to the relationship. We are driven to this conclusion, in part, by the very high correlations among mentoring variables. For example, Allen, Johnson, Rodopman, Ottinot, and Biga (2009) reported correlations that ranged from .38 to .82, with an average of .62, among protégé-reported relationship quality, career support, psychosocial support, negative mentoring experiences, and mentor commitment. These findings are not unusual. Meta-analytic effect sizes of the relationship between career and psychosocial mentoring have been estimated at .66 (Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008) and at .68 (Eby et al., 2010). Moreover, the effect size between psychosocial support and relationship quality has been estimated at .72 (Eby et al., 2010) and at .63 (Allen et al., 2004). We believe researchers (ourselves included) have been unwittingly studying affect but not understanding affect’s role in how the individual experiences the mentoring relationship.

A Person-Centric Focus to the Study of Mentoring

What would be the basis of a more person-centric approach to the study of mentoring? We submit that the study of mentoring is in need of a within-person, episodic approach that focuses on the experiences of the relationship participants (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & McDermid, 2005). Beal et al. (2005) describe behavior episodes as natural units of activity that have recognizable thematic coherence. They are organized around relevant goals, personal strivings, and desired states. Behavior episodes can be nested within tasks or project episodes. Mentoring episodes share these same characteristics; consequently, mentoring relationships are naturally composed of a series of behavior episodes, each of which can be analyzed to determine relational quality (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007) or to predict the future course of a mentoring relationship (Eby, 2007).

To help illustrate our point, we provide an example based on the student–major professor mentoring relationship. We use this example for ease of illustration as it is likely relatable to most readers. The first meeting between the faculty mentor and the student protégé can be considered the first mentoring episode. The student comes into
the meeting with his or her own goals (e.g., to make a good impression on the faculty mentor). During the meeting, the faculty mentor provides the student with his or her first research assignment. The student may also observe that the faculty mentor seems distracted, which could be interpreted as disinterest. The student protégé will come away from that meeting with a particular feeling state that in part forms his or her overall evaluation of the relationship at that point in time. The next example episode is a laboratory meeting in which the faculty mentor criticizes the student's research critique in front of his or her peers. This episode too will provoke a reaction and subsequent evaluation of the reaction, which will be further influenced by the student's reaction to the previous episode. For example, the faculty mentor's initial inferred disinterest combined with the subsequent critique could lead the student to not only evaluate the faculty mentor poorly and adjust his or her behaviors accordingly (e.g., avoid the faculty mentor), but also start to doubt his or her own competence. The third episode involves the faculty mentor pointing out errors in the student's data analyses. Reactions to this event compound those experienced earlier and could impact the student's perceptions, behaviors, and goals. If the researcher was to administer a survey to the student at this point in time, responses may suggest that the faculty mentor provides little mentoring and that the relationship is of poor quality, based not on the behavior episodes that have occurred but on the student's affective reaction to them. The "lived-through experience" at this moment for the student would suggest that he or she is involved in an ineffective mentoring relationship. However, as the relationship continues and other episodes occur, the meaning of those early experiences may change for the student. In later episodes the faculty mentor provides the student with positive feedback and specific direction regarding his or her thesis idea, extends networking opportunities, and offers tips for improving classroom teaching. Upon reflection the student may reframe those earlier episodes as the mentor facilitating the development of the student's scientific rigor and the mental toughness necessary to excel as a scholar. A typical survey study conducted only at this point would likely reflect that effective mentoring has occurred but will miss the rich affective and behavioral information generated earlier in the relationship that could shed light on the subjective transformation from ineffective to effective.

Viewing the mentoring relationship from the lens of this within-person, episodic approach opens up a number of interesting and unique research questions. What specific feelings does the faculty mentor's initial distraction arouse in the student? How do these feelings influence the student's cognitive schema regarding the faculty member? The university? How does this feeling impact the subsequent behavior of the student? What is the combined effect of the multiple negative feelings associated with the faculty members' critiques on the student's intrinsic motivation and sense of self-worth? How do these states subsequently affect broader aspects of the student's life, such as his or her physical well-being, energy, activity, and relationships with others? How do aspects of the student's personality moderate each emotional response, as well as their impact on other individual outcomes? As the faculty mentor begins to provide more positive feedback, how quickly and permanently does the shift from negative to positive affect occur? How does the student assess the "affect spin" of moving from a negative affective state to a more positive one, as more positive feedback emerges from the faculty mentor? Does this assessment (i.e., the "feeling" of moving from negative to positive affect) contribute to important individual outcomes above and beyond the individual emotions themselves? Is the level of positive affect at the end of a mentoring relationship lessened somewhat by initial negative affect or perhaps is it even stronger as the student reconceptualizes the intent?
and impact of the initial “tough” critiques? Overall, what mentor behaviors have more or less impact on different affective reactions?

Investigating the answers to such questions would seem to call for a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches that could utilize a wide range of data-gathering techniques. For example, one way to begin would be to conduct retrospective turning point interviews with mentor and protégé pairs that focus on identifying moments over the course of the relationships at which their relationships were negatively or positively significantly altered (Becker et al., 2009). Other methods could include observation, participant diary keeping, interviews with individuals knowledgeable about the participant, and biofeedback, in addition to traditional attitude surveys and standardized skill, cognitive, and personality assessments. For example, standardized assessments may be collected at the start of the relationship and used to predict relationship dynamics and trajectories captured via observation and participant diary keeping of mentoring episodes. This could be accompanied by periodic surveys that assess protégé outcomes (e.g., well-being and productivity).

Effective for Who?

In our remarks thus far, we have not addressed mentoring research and its tie to what Weiss and Rupp refer to as the “collective purpose agenda.” We can extend our question as to “what is effective mentoring” to include “effective for who?” Mentoring has been studied as a way to enhance both individual (e.g., Dreher & Cox, 1996) and organizational success (e.g., Allen, Smith, Mael, O’Shea, & Eby, 2009). In our view, mentoring research as a whole is not entrapped in the collective purpose agenda. However, what there is little recognition nor study of is when the two may be in conflict. Mentoring relationships can result in outcomes that are good for the individual but bad for the organization and vice versa. Going back to our student–faculty mentor example, a skilled and transformative mentor will ultimately help the student realize and capitalize on his or her career potential. What if that potential lies in another field? The student may leave the program of study to follow another more fulfilling career path. This reflects poorly on the program’s graduation rate. Mentors may be torn between fulfilling the collective purpose of the organization (i.e., graduating students) and doing what is best for individual students (i.e., guiding them to realize their true calling). Similar examples from workplace mentoring relationships in which helping an individual achieve personal and career fulfillment may come at the expense of the interests of the collective can be easily generated. The point we are trying to make here is the importance of considering the “effective for who” question in our research and recognizing the tension that can exist between the two.

Conclusion

We have attempted to point out research possibilities that result from a person-centric focus on mentoring relationships. The current research paradigm is not adept at revealing the long-term, personal, and episodic nature of mentoring, with its emotional ups and downs and its wide range in potential functions and activities. Weiss and Rupp’s call for a more person-centric direction for research in industrial–organizational psychology brings into focus an alternative view of the role of affect in mentoring relationships and provides a wider range of research questions to gain more insight into what works well, why it works well, and how it works.

References


