



**BRITISH ACADEMY  
OF MANAGEMENT**

---

**BAM**  
CONFERENCE

---

**3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER**

**ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM**

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

**About BAM**

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is the leading authority on the academic field of management in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars and engaging with international peers.

<http://www.bam.ac.uk/>

# **The Gendering of Formal Mentoring at Work: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda**

**Dr Helen Woolnough, Professor Julia Rouse, Dr Sally Jones**

**The Sylvia Pankhurst Gender and Diversity Research Centre**

**Manchester Metropolitan University, U.K. - Faculty of Business and Law**

## **Introduction**

It is well documented that mentoring relationships at work can contribute to individual growth and development (Allen and Eby, 2007; Woolnough and Fielden, 2017). Traditionally, mentoring follows a US apprenticeship model and has been characterised as an interpersonal relationship between an older, more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced protégé that supports the protégé's development and progress at work (Ragins and Kram, 2007, p.5). A wealth of literature has emerged over the past 30 years documenting the effects of this mentor-protégé dyad in terms of mentor and protégé distal and proximal outcomes and their antecedents (Chandler, Kram and Yip, 2011; Matarazzo and Finkelstein, 2015; Joo, Yu and Atwater, 2018). Workplace mentoring is said to create career and psycho-social functions that can include, but also go beyond, the immediate skill development of coaching (Grey, Garvey and Lane, 2016). For the mentee, career functions are said to arise from challenging assignments, sponsorship and visibility. Psychosocial functions include development of a sense of competence and self-confidence and are achieved through processes such as role modelling, counselling and friendship (Fowler, 2016; Kram, 1985). Additionally, more recent work outlines the European/Australian model of developmental mentoring which regards the relationship as more facilitate with the potential for transformational learning for both mentee and mentor (Seignot and Clutterbuck, 2016).

As '*mentoring relationships do not exist in a vacuum*' (Janssen, Vuuren and Jong, 2016: 499), research has begun to explore the context in which the mentoring dyad is located (Chandler *et al.* 2011; Jones and Corner, 2012). However, the mentoring literature has been criticized for its focus on empirical results at the expense of theoretical innovation (Allen *et al.*, 2008; Jones and Corner, 2012). In their review of informal mentoring, Janssen *et al.* (2016) called on researchers to go beyond the mentor-protégé dyad and think more ontologically about what social processes are at work in mentoring. These concerns are central to the development of this paper. We intend to offer a conceptual review of the literature on formal workplace mentoring through a systematic review of relevant literature and focus on how it is gendered and gendering.

There are two key reasons why a rigorous understanding of the gendering of formal workplace mentoring is important. First, because of ongoing gender equalities in the workplace, and specifically in relation to senior leadership, and concerns that this may arise, in part, due to inequalities in mentoring processes. Second, due to widespread interest in mentoring for women as a measure to address workplace inequalities and to promote women's leadership; clearly, it is vital that interventions build on rigorous theory and evidence. Indeed, research to date has often been driven by the search to understand the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon in organisations (Davidson and Burke, 2014; Ragins and Cotton, 1999) and concern that women may be at a disadvantage in their careers in comparison to their male counterparts if they are

less likely to obtain a mentor, or, if when they engage in mentoring, the nature of that mentoring is different and produces lower outcomes (McKeen and Bujaki, 2007; Ragins, 2002). Theory attests that organizations are deeply embedded in gendered processes and that organisational structures and institutional practices create conditions and effects that disadvantage women in their careers (Acker, 1990; Broadbridge and Fielden, 2015; Connell, 2006). Clearly, an empowering mentoring process would need to address these processes. It is timely to consider how much we know about this kind of relationship.

The influence of gender on mentoring relationships has been the topic of a number of important studies. According to Ragins' theory of diversified mentoring relationships, for example, the dyadic gender composition of the mentoring relationship makes a difference because the mentoring partners are members of groups that possess differing degrees of power within organizations (Ragins 1997, 2002). This literature base, along with the wider mentoring discourse, largely focuses on the singular mentor-protégé dyad in an informal capacity (Wanberg, Welsh and Hezlett, 2003 being a notable exception). Whilst this can reveal powerful insights into the relationship between the agents involved, this focus attends to assisting individual women rather than uncovering the continuation of structuring practices within mentoring that potentially produce and re-produce the gendered status-quo. This may be particularly acute in formal mentoring. For example, a goal of some organizationally sanctioned formal mentoring programmes is to increase diversity at higher levels of the organization by placing a focus on women (and other under-represented groups). Among other benefits, formal mentoring is believed to help women overcome deficiencies in network access to powerful actors or dominant coalitions in the organization and is therefore proposed as an important means of addressing gender equality in the workplace (Noe, 1988; Srivastava, 2015).

Our paper will adopt a realist ontology and focus on how formal mentoring is gendered or gendering (Archer, 1995; Rouse and Woolnough, 2018). Informal mentoring relationships develop on an ad hoc basis, can be initiated by either party and are usually driven by the needs of protégé and mentor (Blickle *et al.*, 2010). The protégé may attract the attention of their mentor by excelling at work or pursuing similar interests, or the protégé may seek out a more experienced organisational member to discuss work-related questions and explain organisational norms (Noe, Greenberger and Wang, 2002; Singh, Ragins and Tharenou, 2009). In contrast, formal mentoring develops with organizational assistance and adheres to organisational directives (Blake-Beard, O'Neill and McGowan, 2007). Given the documented benefits of informal mentoring, organisations have in more recent years attempted to capitalise on mentoring as a human resource strategy to enhance the careers, development and performance of employees by implementing formal mentoring programmes (Gill, Roulet and Kerridge, 2018; Woolnough and Fielden, 2017). The distinction between *informal* and *formal* mentoring is important because of the fundamental differences in the context, processes and outcomes of these relationships, leading scholars to call for an examination of formal mentoring relationships in their own right to progress mentoring theory (Matarazzo and Finkelstein, 2015, Parise and Forret, 2008).

Formal mentoring relationships are an important focus of review because *formal* mentoring programmes in organizations in the U.K. and across Western parts of the globe have become widespread. In particular, formal mentoring is commonly regarded as a key mechanism to promote women's careers. Recently, a light has been shined on the value of mentoring for women as organizations in the U.K. seek to implement mechanisms to support women's leadership in response to compulsory gender pay gap reporting (Frith, 2017). We consider that the mentoring being utilized in organizations, whether for gendered purposes or not, is likely to be gendered and to have gendering effects. It is therefore vital to review what knowledge we

have about formal mentoring in the workplace and pose more gender-theory informed questions about how mentoring can, or does, change gender relations. We believe the time is right to uncover what is known about how formal mentoring is affected by workplace gendering and propose a fresh research agenda built on renewed theoretical direction to address clear knowledge gaps.

In their review of *informal* mentoring, Janssen *et al.* (2016), critique existing conceptualisations of mentoring, urging researchers to pay greater attention to theory. Their aim is to develop a process view of mentoring, less concerned with inputs and outcomes and more with the mechanisms through which mentoring outcomes are achieved. Their social constructionist position focuses on actor sensemaking and supports a view of mentoring as a continuous relational accomplishment. We are sympathetic to Janssen *et al.*'s call for a process view. However, we draw on critical realist philosophy to suggest that mentor and mentee sensemaking is a partial lens through which to understand how, and for whom, mentoring works (Archer, 1995). Instead, we outline a critical realist conception of both formal workplace mentoring and of gender and employ this in our realist review.

Our paper will develop to outline our critical realist conception of formal workplace mentoring and of gender and use this to define the review questions in our systematic literature review. We will then present the boundary conditions of the review before setting out our review methodology. Next, we will critically review the knowledge base on gender and formal mentoring in relation to four specific areas that are relevant for theory development. In our discussion and conclusion, we will build on our review to develop an agenda for future research, thereby contributing to a richer and fuller picture of mentoring research.

### **Boundary conditions**

This review focuses on *formal* mentoring relationships at work. These relationships differ from informal relationships on four different dimensions (Baugh and Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Janssen *et al.*, 2016). First, formal mentoring relationships are matched by a third party to meet organisational needs, while informal mentoring evolves spontaneously through a process of mutual attraction, driven by the needs of protégé and mentor. Second, given that formal mentoring relationships are organisationally sanctioned within a mentoring programme, formal mentoring is usually more visible than informal mentoring. In some instances, informal mentoring is not always recognised or articulated as such by both members. Thirdly, formal mentoring relationships are bound by some programmatic prescription in terms of programme requirements whereas the scope of informal relationships is unbounded. Finally, formal mentoring relationships are time limited (usually 9-12 months), while informal mentoring relationships are not (Parise and Forret, 2008).

Additionally, this review will focus on studies that explicitly state their focus on formal relationships (as opposed to informal mentoring) and those that address formal compared to informal mentoring relationships, but where results are explicitly separated in the analysis and discussion. Many studies do not specify the exact type of mentoring under review (Allen *et al.*, 2008) and studies that are unclear in their identification of type of mentoring relationships under examination were excluded from our review. Furthermore, studies discussing forms of mentoring other than workplace mentoring (e.g. student-faculty mentoring and youth mentoring) will be omitted from our review to ensure our review focuses on workplace contexts. We also include studies that address alternative mentoring structures (e.g. peer

mentoring, on-line mentoring) to explore what they may reveal about gendering processes. Crucially, our review questions relate to the differing contexts of informal and formal mentoring. It therefore important that our review focuses on ascertaining precise knowledge about formal mentoring.

## **Methodology**

A systematic literature review (SLR) will be conducted to provide a rigorous and comprehensive synthesis of extant studies in the field under review (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). Our search strategy will focus on peer-reviewed papers identified through electronic searches in major academic databases (e.g. PSYCINFO; Scopus and Web of Science). To meet minimum scholarly standards, we will include publications in peer reviewed journals ranked 1-4 in the ABS 2015 journals list (Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016). Although mindful of more recent work by Adams, Smart and Huff (2017) outlining the currency that grey literature can have in systematic reviews, we exclude grey literature in the main review. Mentoring literature is awash with practitioner-oriented publications providing anecdotal evidence with respect to the benefits of formal mentoring and advice on how to implement formal programmes within organizations (Baugh and Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Blake-Beard *et.al.*, 2007). Whilst some of this may be considered high-quality work, one of our contributions is to bring together what is known within scholarly work, therefore we restrict our review to what is known within peer reviewed journals. We will discuss the value of grey literature in our Discussion.

Building from our critical realist position, we will critically review the knowledge base on gender and formal mentoring in relation to the following four review questions (and we will expand on these in turn as the paper develops):

- (1) How have research questions and methods themselves been gendered and gendering?
- (2) What do we know about the gendered contexts in which formal workplace mentoring occurs?
- (3) What do we know about how the process of formal workplace mentoring for women is shaped by gender?
- (4) What are the gender effects of mentoring outcomes and, in particular, what do we know about mentoring as a route to female empowerment?

The paper will conclude with an agenda for future research and practice, building on the gaps identified by the review.

## References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society*, **4**, pp. 139-158.
- Adams, R.J., Smart, P. and Huff A.S. (2017). Shades of Grey: Guidelines for working with the grey literature in systematic reviews for management and organizational studies. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, **19**, pp. 432-454.
- Allen T.D. and Eby L.T. (2007). *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring: A Multiple Perspectives Approach*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- Allen, T.D., Eby, L.T., O'Brien, K.E. and Lentz, E. (2008). The state of mentoring research: a qualitative review of current research methods and future research implications. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **73**, pp. 343-357.
- Archer, M.S. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baugh, S.G. and Fagenson-Eland, E.A. (2007). Formal mentoring programs: A 'poor cousin' to informal relationships? In Ragins, B.R. and Kram, K.E. (eds), *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage pp. 412-425.
- Blake-Beard, S.D., O'Neill, R.M. and McGowan, E. (2007). Blind dates? The importance of matching in successful formal mentoring relationships. In Ragins, B.R. and Kram, K.E. (eds), *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage pp. 617-632.
- Blickle, G., Schneider, P.B., Meurs, J.A. and Perrewe, P.L. (2010). Antecedents and consequences of perceived barriers to obtaining mentoring: a longitudinal investigation. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **40**, pp. 1897– 1920.
- Broadbridge A.M. and Fielden, S.L. (2015). *Handbook of Gendered Careers in Management: Getting In, Getting on, Getting Out*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.
- Chandler, D.E., Kram, K.E. and Yip, J. (2011). An ecological systems perspective on mentoring at work: a review and future prospects. *Academy of Management Annals*, **5**, pp. 519-570.
- Connell, R. (2006). Glass ceilings or gendered institutions? Mapping the gender regimes of public sector worksites. *Public Administration Review*, **66**, 6, pp. 837-849.
- Davidson, M.J. and Burke, R.J. (2014). *Women in Management Worldwide: Progress and Prospects*, Oxon, Gower.
- Denyer, D. and Tranfield, D. (2009). Producing a systematic review. In Buchanan, D. and Bryman, A. (eds). *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Research Methods*: London: Sage, pp. 671-689.

- Gill, M.J., Routlet, T.J. and Kerridge, S.P. (2018). Mentoring for mental health: A mixed-method study of the benefits of formal mentoring programmes in the English police force. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **108**, pp. 201–213.
- Grey, D.E., Garvey B. and Lane, D.A. (2016). *A Critical Introduction to Coaching and Mentoring*, London, SAGE.
- Fowler J.L. (2016). Pursuing, doing and reviewing mentoring relationships. In Broadbridge, A.M. and Fielden, S.L. (eds), *Handbook of Gendered careers in Management: Getting In, Getting On, Getting Out*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, pp. 225-242.
- Frith, B. (2017). Mentoring can help bridge the senior gender gap, *HR Magazine*. <https://www.hr magazine.co.uk/article-details/mentoring-can-help-bridge-the-senior-gender-gap>, Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> Feb 2018.
- Janssen, S., van Vuuren M. and de Jong M.D.T. (2016). Informal mentoring at work: A review and suggestions for future research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, **18**, pp. 498-517.
- Jones, R. and Corner, J. (2012). Seeing the forest and the trees: a complex adaptive systems lens for mentoring. *Human Relations*, **65**, pp. 391-411.
- Joo, M. Yu G. and Atwater L. (2018). Formal leadership mentoring and motivation to lead in South Korea, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* **107**, pp. 310–326.
- Kram K.E. (1985). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Matarazzo, K.L. Finkelstein, L.M. (2015). Formal mentorships: examining objective-setting, event participation and experience. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, **30**, 6, pp. 675– 691.
- McKeen, C. and Bujaki, M. (2007). Gender and mentoring: issues, effects, and opportunities. In Ragins, B.R. and Kram, K.E. (eds), *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 197–222.
- Noe, R. A. (1988). Women and mentoring: A review and research agenda. *Academy of Management Review*, **13**, pp. 65-78.
- Noe, R.A., Greenberger, D.B. and Wang, S. (2002). Mentoring: what we know and where we might go. *Research in Personnel and Human Resource Management*, **21**, pp. 129–173.
- Parise M. R. and Forret M.L. (2008). Formal mentoring programs: The relationship of program design and support to mentors’ perceptions of benefits and costs. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **72**, pp. 225–240.
- Radaelli G. and Sitton-Kent, L. (2016). Middle Managers and the Translation of New Ideas in Organizations: A Review of Micro-practices and Contingencies, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, **18**, pp. 311–332.
- Ragins, B.R. (1997). Diversified mentoring relationships in organizations: A power perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, **22**, pp. 482-521.

Ragins B.R. (2002). Understanding diversified mentoring relationships: definitions, challenges and strategies, in Clutterbuck D. and Ragins B.R. (eds), *Mentoring and Diversity: An international perspective*, Butterworth Heinemann: Oxford, pp. 23-54.

Ragins, B.R. and Cotton, J.L. (1999). Mentoring functions and outcomes: a comparison of men and women in formal and informal mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **84**, 529-550.

Ragins, B.R. and Kram, K.E. (2007). The roots and meaning of mentoring. In Ragins, B.R. and Kram, K.E. (eds), *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research and Practice*. Thousand oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 3-15.

Rouse J. and Woolnough H. (2018). Engaged or Activist Scholarship? Feminist reflections on philosophy, accountability and transformational potential, *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, 36, **4**, pp. 429-448.

Seignot, N. and Clutterbuck, D. (2016). *Mentoring New Parents at Work; A guide for businesses and organisations*. Routledge: Oxon.

Singh, R., Ragins, B.R. and Tharenou, P. (2009). Who gets a mentor? A longitudinal assessment of the rising star hypothesis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **74**, pp. 11–17.

Srivastava S. B. (2015). Network Intervention: Assessing the Effects of Formal Mentoring on Workplace Networks. *Social Forces*, 94, **1**, pp. 427-452.

Wanberg, C.R., Welsh, E.T. and Hezlett, S.A. (2003). *Mentoring research: A review and dynamic process model*. In *Research in Personnel and Human Resource Management*, (eds), Ferris, G.R. and Martocchio, J.J., pp. 39-124. Greenwich, Elsevier Science.

Woolnough H.M. and Fielden S.L. (2017). *Mentoring in Nursing and Healthcare: Supporting career and personal development*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell.