

Care, Connect, Cultivate: Supporting, Teaching, and Networking Mentors in Organizations

Welch, M. J.

Research

This paper presents three case studies of natural mentoring relationships within universities and workplaces. The three mentors used multi-faceted approaches, including supporting wellbeing, nurturing cognitive or skill development, and facilitating supportive networks to help mentees navigate career and personal growth as racial or gender minorities in their organizations. The three mentoring cases are adult relationships, but closely resemble Rhodes's mechanisms of youth mentoring model, where supporting identity growth, cognitive development, and other mediating relationships can lead to improved outcomes for mentees. Six qualitative interviews from three mentoring relationships are the basis for the three case studies of developmental relationships. These case studies used replication case study methodology, where mentors and mentees in each of the three mentorships were asked about similar phenomena from the relationship: formation, how mentors offered personal and instrumental support, additional network connections mentors facilitated, and ways mentors supported growth in mentees different from their own paths. All cases were finalized using participant checks. The three cases show how each mentor used a combination of caring, coaching, supporting mentee networking with multiple supportive relationships, and cultivating mentees' unique talents to support their success within the universities or workplaces where the mentorships formed. Understanding how skilled mentors combine approaches to help mentees navigate professional and personal growth in organizations where they are racial or gender minorities can offer lessons to other natural mentors in similar settings.

Keywords: Holistic mentoring, developmental networks, diversified mentoring, instrumental

Introduction

Mentoring is a multifaceted relationship. Some mentoring literature focuses on one aspect of mentoring, such as relationship formation (Spencer, 2006) or stage of development (Keller, 2005). Mentorships, however, often support multiple aspects of a mentee's development using a variety of tools. Moreover, a number of mentoring frameworks overlap with one another (Gowdy et al., 2024). Seeing how mentors help mentees navigate new organizations at key developmental stages reveals a holistic mentoring approach in these cases. Typical workplace mentoring may only focus on technical work concerns. Many new students or employees face a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991), or a threshold that prompts reconsideration of basic assumptions. This may be particularly true when mentees are racial, gender or other minorities (Markle et al., 2022). These new students or employees will require more holistic support, such as understanding otherwise hidden workplace knowledge (Johnsson & Smith, 2016) as well as for various personal or psychosocial concerns (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992; Kram, 1988).

Rhodes's (2005) mechanisms of youth mentoring model captures how mentors can approach developmental relationships in such a multifaceted way. While Rhodes's model was primarily focused on youth mentoring, I argue here that this model helps to explain how effective mentors can use multifaceted approaches to support adult mentees. The cases presented here illustrate how such a holistic approach is particularly helpful to new, minoritized members of university and workplace communities.

Literature Review

Rhodes's model is a holistic one, where mentors develop complex relationships, attend to various kinds of personal, cognitive, and identity development, and cultivate other mediating relationships for mentees (Gowdy et al., 2024; Rhodes, 2005). I argue that this model effectively captures the holistic nature of the mentoring needed to support new, minoritized adult members of universities and workplaces. In particular, the model captures how effective mentors of racial, gender, and other minorities

offer care, connection, and cultivation to their mentees. Rhodes's (2005) model is first and foremost multidimensional, where mentors express care by attending to social-emotional, cognitive, and even identity development in addition to school or workplace skills. In Kram's (1988) terms, mentors balance caring and coaching. Mentors show care by attending to both psychosocial and career-oriented needs of mentees (e.g., Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992; Kram, 1988). Particularly in relationships that support minoritized persons, such as mentees who are among the few women in an organization, full support must include not only personal care, but also reveal for mentees the inside knowledge of the organization (Johnson & Smith, 2016). This instrumental perspective that combining personal care with teaching the mentee knowledge or skills is a powerful approach (Keller, 2010).

Beyond the dyad, Rhodes's (2005) model assumes mentees have connections to other, mediating relationships. Mentors often make these connections to a supportive network, involving these connections in the mentorship. This can be particularly true for minoritized members of organizations, such as being one of few women or persons of color, like those described in this paper. Thomas (2001) has described similar paths for Black employees who reach the executive level, who had a primary mentor, but also several additional "sponsors" in their network. Finally, Rhodes's (2005) model supports mentees achieving their own goals, not just those defined by the mentor. I refer to this as cultivating mentees, inspired by Montgomery (2017) and her analogy likening mentoring to plant care, whereby mentors understand the environment and care for, not fundamentally alter, mentees. The mechanisms model assumes a level of empathy on the mentor's part, which implies mentors may have an idea of what a mentee needs, but also consider what mentees want (Gowdy et al, 2024; Rhodes, 2005). For mentors, this requires not only empathy, but openness to learning from mentees. As Zhang and colleagues (2023) found, a mutual learning orientation can create a powerful, satisfactory

mentorship for both parties.

Methods

This paper presents three case studies of mentoring relationships that illustrate efforts to use Rhodes's (2005) multifaceted approach to mentoring minoritized adult mentees who were new to their organizations. The three cases were based on six, semi-structured interviews, one with each mentor and mentee. The six participants were identified using snowball sampling, using personal referrals from the author to known mentoring relationships. While this method is limited by selection bias, it can be particularly well-suited for studying sensitive issues, such as race and identity in the workplace, and for observing natural phenomena like natural mentoring relationships (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

The three case studies used replication case study methodology (Yin, 2003). That is, both mentors and mentees in each of the three mentorships were asked about similar phenomena from the relationship. Using themes from a theory of mentoring stages (Keller, 2010) and networks of support in cross-racial relationships (Manongsong and Ghosh, 2023; Thomas, 2001), participants discussed relationship formation, how mentors offered personal and instrumental support, additional network connections mentors facilitated, and ways mentors supported mentees' unique growth. These three cases were selected as representing diversified mentoring relationships, which have unique dynamics (Ragins, 2010).

Interviews were analyzed using open and then axial coding (Simmons, 2017) to understand how mentors and mentees understood the nature of support for these minoritized mentees. The author conducted participant checks with all participants. Participants reviewed their case drafts and the author incorporated feedback. The members of the three case studies are summarized in Table 1. The remainder of this section summarizes each of the three cases. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Table 1.
Mentoring Case Study Members and Identities

Mentor	Mentor Self-Identification	Mentee	Mentee Self-Identification	Mentoring Setting
Amos	Staff, Black, Male	Steven	Student, Black, Male	University
Rick	Director, White, Male	Olga	Employee, White and LGBTQ+, Female	Workplace
Robert	Supervisor, White, Male	Anna	Employee, Latina, Female	Workplace

Amos and Steven

Amos is now retired after 32 years as an administrator at a small, suburban university in the Northeast. One of his most important roles was forming a men's group for Black and Latino

students on the mostly White campus. Amos created a space where students could come together and learn to navigate college and life, just as Amos's group of graduate school mentors had done for him. Amos had learned to navigate political university systems with the support of

a network of mentors. Together, these mentors provided Amos with his diverse mentoring toolkit. Amos also served as an advisor to the campus radio station; he hosted a weekly jazz show. Amos knew of Steven, who, like Amos, was one of the few Black men on campus. Steven was an 18-year-old freshman, studying business and playing basketball, far from his home in the Midwest, and one of about eight Black students in his class of 800. He was even taller than most of his classmates. In his first year, Stephen was walking through the union building when he heard jazz drifting into the hallway. The younger man paused, peeked in the door to see who was playing some of his favorite music, and kept walking. That's when Amos called him back.

Amos invited Steven to connect about music and to give him a home on campus. He accepted the invitation and began joining Amos at the radio station. They listened to jazz, and talked about the music and the musicians who created it. The mentor remembered his student as a bright, deep thinker who could discuss a variety of topics. Their learning went both ways. In their disagreements about jazz, Amos recalls Steven could offer "intelligent pushback" in a unique way for a young student. For example, Amos's social consciousness had left him disillusioned with trumpeter Louis Armstrong; Steven brought him around. "He broadened my thinking on that," Amos said.

Steven started attending the men's group, which offered camaraderie and access to mentorship, particularly Amos's. Over the course of that year, the men gathered regularly for meals, where Amos advised the men on dinner etiquette or how to navigate campus life, from literal directions to buildings to "how to comport ourselves on campus," Steven remembered. Amos also challenged the members of the men's group on jokes their favorite comedians made, or on ways lyrics in their favorite music referred to women. He connected Steven to some of the other Black faculty on campus, helping him to build a network of supportive staff. Amos started to attend Steven's basketball games. Steven came to Amos's home for dinner.

After Steven had graduated from college, he began his career as a stockbroker. It was not a good fit. While he was looking for his next step, he reconnected with Amos. Through discussions with Amos, Steven decided to return to the university as a graduate student. Their mentorship continued, but both men knew Steven needed additional mentors. Over the years, Amos had served as an administrator at the university, and therefore could direct Stephen to paths like his own, such as dean positions. Stephen was considering becoming a faculty member in management. So at this later stage, Amos helped Steven form a network. The mentee got personal support from Amos and more specifically career-oriented guidance from others who had careers more like the one Steven envisioned. At Amos's retirement, Steven was there, now one of the first alumni of color invited back to be a faculty member at the university.

Rick and Olga

Rick spent his career in high school sports administration, eventually rising to executive director of the scholastic sports association in a midwestern state. In taking the top job, he imitated his own mentor in some ways, but adapted in others.

Staff, including Olga, found him "intimidating" initially. Her mentorship with Rick did not begin until she was ready. While she came to love sports as a champion high school athlete, she did not have much of a professional direction as a 22-year-old intern. In her early professional years, she was more focused on her social life than building a career. "I had no business working here," she said.

She gradually discovered a hunger for her work, becoming curious about the history and operations of the association, so she found ways to talk to Rick. As she asked him questions, he told her about the office library he established. They talked about writing as a way to clarify thinking. She discovered their mutual interest in the music of The Eagles and Rick's passion for the association's history.

Olga recalls that, as she worked harder, she became impatient for opportunity and promotion. Rick stressed that there was a path forward for her, but she needed to be patient. As Olga became more engaged in her work, she and Rick formed a connection that became a natural mentorship concerned with her career and her personal development; her opportunities grew. Rick nurtured the relationship by coming by her office almost daily to check in or tell her about developments in the association's policies. He shared wisdom, Olga said, but also questions he was mulling and invited her into his deliberations. These regular connections were reassuring to her: "It seems small, but it was big. You trusted that opportunity would come."

A shift in their mentorship came when Rick asked Olga work with their communications lead, Franz, to grow their social media presence, a new platform at the time. Rick recalls Olga having "untapped talents," and felt she was ready for the challenge and responsibility. Olga recalled, "He knew I had a tenacity, but I needed a focal point for that energy." Olga stressed the level of trust Rick put in her and Franz: "He never micromanaged," she said, but instead asked lots of detailed questions, asked for a written plan, and then let the younger staff lead the way.

Over time, Rick added additional challenges for Olga. He asked her to take on new duties. As she struggled to juggle these various tasks, Rick assured her she could handle it, and that this might lead to the opportunity she was waiting for: "Rick taught me the best answer was always 'yes.'" Olga remembered, "He cared and he challenged me. I don't know how you balance those two things, but he did it. He was always pushing me—gently, but he was pushing."

In one meeting early in her career, Olga spoke out forcefully on a contentious policy question. She described herself as losing her cool and being

unprofessional. Rick asked a colleague to offer a more stern correction to Olga in private. Then, he took her aside himself and gently explained that there were softer, but more effective, ways to make her points. She remembers these two conversations as important, and Rick's approach as "fatherly."

As they became closer, Olga said she trusted Rick enough to reveal something important: She came out to him. This was difficult for Olga, one of few women in the office, younger than Rick and most of the other staff, and likely the only person in the association who openly identified Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others (LGBTQ+) at that time. Rick came to her wedding, and their spouses knew each other. Olga eventually became an Assistant Director in the association.

Robert and Anna

Robert initially moved to Chicago for a job as an athletic director at a charter school, and shortly thereafter became the director of athletics for the whole charter school network. Robert's life has been defined by sports, both as a coach's son and an athlete. He learned early about the power of sports and wanted to provide that impact for other people: "My model was my father... I saw the trust he built in players while also maintaining incredibly high expectations of them. ...When I saw that impact, I knew I wanted to...create the same impact."

It was in his role of network administrator that Robert met Anna, who was a young college graduate in her first job as an athletics administrator in the network. Anna is a former athlete, and she dove into coaching as well as administrative duties. She is also Latina, and it meant a great deal to her to return to Chicago and serve the community she came from. Soon she felt overwhelmed. In addition to navigating moving from college to the workplace, she was asked to coordinate scheduling, referees, and compliance across many schools in the network. Her role included leading meetings and denying requests while being the youngest person, and one of few women, in these meetings.

For Robert and Anna, they both recalled the importance of a mentor seeing their mentee as a whole person. Robert began meeting with Anna one-on-one, both to help her understand the demands of her role and to get to know her. They talked openly about her background as a Chicago-born Latina, and what an asset it could be in her work. He began attending meetings Anna was running, letting her lead—and struggle. At times, Robert said, he stepped in when meetings got tense, like in one particularly contentious budget discussion. However, as Anna recalled, he also "gave me a lot of freedom to do things by myself." Robert and Anna described a natural mentorship that went beyond her performance at work to include building Anna's belief in her own potential. "She had to grow to a place where she believed in herself as much as I believed in her,"

Robert said. He encouraged Anna to practice her remarks to build her confidence speaking to a group. He offered to send her to conferences to grow her professional network and skills. Beyond that, he helped her consider other goals like graduate school at prestigious programs outside of Chicago. Anna recalls Robert's coaching became as much about self-image as about running meetings. Anna recalled that, "He listened and challenged me."

Today, Anna is a collegiate athletics administrator, living far from Chicago. But she still credits Robert with helping her to develop the confidence to pursue her short-term duties at the charter network, and her longer-term goals in athletic administration. Robert supported this growth by supporting Anna as a whole person, not just as an employee. Both knew that he was preparing Anna for bigger things.

Discussion

In this section, I discuss how mentors used each of three approaches to support mentees. These are caring, connecting, and cultivating.

Caring

In all three cases, the mentors expressed care for mentees, or interest in their personal development and needs, in the service of supporting their overall success in the organizations. Robert and Anna talked often, Anna said, about her self-confidence and her image of herself as a person, not just an employee. Robert supported her in improving her written communication, he said, not just because it helped their shared work together, but also because it was part of allowing Anna to develop and to see her full potential. "We talked about how what I'm intimidated by doesn't define me," Anna said. Robert was interested in helping Anna think differently about herself. He worked to make sure that, as a woman, she was comfortable and confident communicating with a group of mostly older men by helping her practice remarks or edit emails and memos before sending. Robert's approach is consistent with Kram's (1988) classic notion of attending to psychosocial as well as career concerns. Amos did this for Steven, making a personal connection and helping him think about his personal development, including how to navigate the university as one of few Black men at the school. Such guidance is consistent with supporting minoritized mentees by offering inside knowledge within an organization (Johnsson & Smith, 2016). Rick believed in Olga's ability, but first nurtured connections and self-confidence to support advancement. For all three mentees, their support is holistic, consistent with the Rhodes (2005) multifaceted model.

Connecting

In the three cases presented here, mentors

supported mentees by connecting them with other supportive people. The use of a mentor and sponsors was most evident between Amos and Steven. As an undergraduate, Amos encouraged Steven to have relationships with other Black faculty who might have different perspectives on navigating the highly political environment of a university. As a graduate student, Steven himself became more self-aware of the need to not only have a staff member like Amos as a guide, but also for connections to faculty whose fields were more the career he envisioned for himself. Consistent with findings for faculty women of color (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2023), the mentees in these case studies found advantages in a constellation of supportive relationships. Between Rick and Olga, he was often introducing her to spaces where important decisions were being made, and collaborated on correcting Olga's intemperate comments. Robert sent Anna to conferences to develop her network. In the Rhodes (2005) model, mentors connect with other important adults like parents. Applying this holistic model to adults, mentors can facilitate connections to other caring figures that Thomas (2001) might call "supporters." All three mentors used supporters to complement their efforts.

Cultivating

Cultivating mentees refers to helping them develop in ways different from their mentors. Rick embodied this most clearly among the three mentors. His professional mentor was a stern man in a suit in a 1970's all-male office; Rick did not address him by his first name. In contrast, Olga described how Rick was highly personable and trusted their team not only to create a new approach to communication using social media, but also to teach him about these tools. Amos and Steven were both jazz lovers. While the mentor, Amos described being open to Steven's new perspectives on the music and the artists who produced it. Robert defined his role as mentor as not only as "developer" but also "listener and learner," particularly for a female mentee. These mentors had clear learning orientations, consistent with Zhang and colleagues' (2023) findings on how such a mindset can make for more satisfying mentoring relationships for both parties. Moreover, these are all instances of cultivation, as Montgomery (2017) describes, where mentors support mentees' unique development, including deviating from the mentor's previous path. Rhodes's (2005) youth model is inherently goal-oriented, not just relationship oriented. In applying this model to adults who are new minoritized members of organizations, it may be even more important to make sure that goals are defined by the adult mentees, as in these three cases, and that mentors are prepared to learn from mentees who may have unique perspectives as minoritized members of their organizations.

Conclusion

The three cases of natural mentoring within organizations show how each mentor took a multidimensional approach with a minoritized mentee. Being racial and gender minorities in their organization impacted their experiences and potentially heightened their receptivity to—and particular needs in—mentoring (Hinton et al., 2020). Being a newer member of their organizations potentially creating a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991), or a threshold of need and receptivity for the mentees. The three mentors used a combination of caring, connecting mentees to networks, and cultivating mentees' paths rather than simply role modeling or replicating. In summary, these mentors took holistic approaches, helping minoritized mentees in acclimate to organizations.

References

- Biernacki, P. & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 141-163.
- Gowdy, G., Jones, K., & Griffith, A. N. (2024). Youth mentoring as a means of supporting mental health for minoritized youth: A reflection on three theoretical frameworks 20 years later. *Youth*, 4(3), 1211-1223. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030076>
- Hamilton, S. F., & Hamilton, M. A. (1992). Mentoring programs: Promise and paradox. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73, 546-550.
- Hinton Jr, A. O., Vue, Z., Termini, C. M., Taylor, B. L., Shuler, H. D., & McReynolds, M. R. (2020). *Mentoring minority trainees: Minorities in academia face specific challenges that mentors should address to instill confidence*. *EMBO reports*, 21(10), e51269.
- Johnson, W.B. & Smith, D. G. (2016). *Athena Rising: How and why men should mentor women*. Harvard Business Press.
- Keller, T. E. (2005). A systemic model of the youth mentoring intervention. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 26, 169-188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-005-1850-2>
- Keller, T. E. (2010). Youth mentoring: Theoretical and methodological issues. In T. D. Allen & L. T. Eby (Eds). *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kram, K. E. (1988). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life*. University Press of America.
- Manongsong, A. M., & Ghosh, R. (2023). Living at the intersections of race and gender in diversified mentoring: Experiences of minoritized women leaders in higher education. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 25(4), 247-278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15234223231193317>

- Markle, R. S., Williams, T. M., Williams, K. S., de-Gravelles, K. H., Bagayoko, D., & Warner, I. M. (2022, May). Supporting historically underrepresented groups in STEM higher education: The promise of structured mentoring networks. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 7, p. 674669). Frontiers Media SA.
- Mezirow J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Montgomery, B. (2017). From deficits to possibilities: Mentoring lessons from plants on cultivating individual growth through environmental assessment and optimization. *Public Philosophy Journal*, 1(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.25335/M5/PPJ.1.1-3>
- Ragins, B. R. (2010). Diversity and workplace mentoring relationships: A review and positive social capital approach. *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring: A Multiple Perspectives Approach*, 281-300.
- Rhodes, J. E. (2005). A model of youth mentoring. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher, (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, (pp.30-43). Sage.
- Simmons, N. (2017). Axial coding. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* 4, 80-82). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n33>
- Spencer, R. (2006) Understanding the mentoring process between adolescents and adults. *Youth & Society*, 37, 287-315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558405278263>
- Thomas, D. A. (2001). The truth about mentoring minorities: Race matters. *Harvard Business Review* 79, 4, 98-112.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). Designing case studies. *Qualita-*