

# Mentoring as a Leisure Activity: On the Informal World of Small-Scale Altruism

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## Abstract

A mentor is one who, with regard to a particular area of life, is trusted and respected by a protégé, based on a significant level of experience and knowledge that the latter believes the former to have. The terms "mentor" and "mentoring" are vaguely defined, even though there has been, over the years, a fair amount of scholarly thought and research reported on both the role and the process. The present article aims to clarify the meanings of these two ideas and to explore the relationship of both to leisure. Mentors are seen as serious leisure volunteers, albeit ones whose altruism is expressed on a small scale. That is they usually target only one person – a protégé – to benefit from their advice.

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The words "mentor" and "mentoring" roll easily off the tongue these days. It seems nearly everyone has been, or wants to be, mentored in some, from their point of view, important area of life. Still, as with so many popular terms, the meaning of these two is fuzzy, even though there has been over the years a fair amount of scholarly thought and research reported on both the role and the process. Kartje's (1996, p. 115) observation still holds: "a commonly agreed on definition of mentor has not yet been established." The aim of the

present article is to try to clarify the meanings of mentor and mentoring, and to explore the relationship of both to leisure. Defining these two as they relate to leisure enables us to make a start toward explaining people's motivation to undertake such activity. The questions of why mentors first decide to play this role and then engage in mentoring have received scant attention. Before addressing ourselves to them, however, we must first provide some intellectual background by examining a sample of the general literature on mentoring.

### **Past work on mentoring**

Both the role of mentor and the actions of mentors have been observed and occasionally even systematically studied in several areas of life. Emphasis has been almost exclusively on what mentors do, or should do, and on programmes organising their services. Research is one of these areas, exemplified in recognition of the need to mentor neophytes entering the field of social scientific exploratory research (Stern, 1994) with particular focus on the subtleties of creating abstract concepts from open-ended data (Glaser, 2005, p. 63). Normally, where the neophytes are graduate students, thesis supervisors perform this role, but such people are not always expert in the exploratory approach taken by their supervisees. Hence the need to find a mentor for this aspect of the project. Another example is found in the Executive Training for Research Application (EXTRA) programme of the Canadian Association for Health Services and Policy Research (CAHSPR). (Information about EXTRA and its programme is available on [www.chsrf.ca/extra](http://www.chsrf.ca/extra).) In this programme mentors provide information, advice, and emotional support for people applying for research grants. The goal is to enhance the protégé's (a common term for the recipient of a mentor's advice) chances of getting the grant as well as furnish explanations for the protégé's success or failure in this venture.

Another area of mentoring centres on youth. For example, in Canada, the Alberta Mentor Foundation for Youth (AMFY) programme has as its mission the pairing of individual adults with high-school adolescents. The mentors are trained to work with individual adolescents, chiefly to encourage them, through counselling and role modelling, to stay in school and perform there as well as possible. The youth in question were not necessarily beset by behavioral problems, but rather, more commonly, were looking for an adult role model and a respected sounding board on how to manage the issues of daily life confronted at this age. Spencer (2006) conducted a study of the process of

mentoring, by way of adult-adolescent pairs, American disadvantaged youth. Her research revealed many details of the relationship linking these pairs, in particular, the importance and workings of such processes as authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship. Finally, Newburn and Shiner (2006) found, in a set of surveys and interviews conducted in Britain, that mentoring programmes for disaffected youth were particularly successful in increasing involvement of these youth in education, training, and work. The programmes were less successful, however, in reducing their deviance.

Work on adults is also prevalent and remarkably varied. For instance Bedini, Stone, and Phoenix (2000) mounted a case study of the recruitment and retention of university students from under-represented minority groups into park, recreation, and leisure programmes in the United States. The authors recommended mentor programmes as a main avenue for reaching these two goals. Kartje (1996) provided a partial, though nonetheless informative, review of the literature on mentoring in business and education, the two areas where most of the research on this process has been done. Mentors in business counsel on corporate protocol, their protégé's route to success, protection from organisational difficulties, and similar matters. Mentors in higher education (this is where most of the research has been conducted) often become paired with students or junior colleagues. The roles of academic advisor, or supervisor, and mentor blur in this sphere. One important difference is that the latter goes beyond what is typically expected of the former, giving insider tips for success and striving to establish a relationship that outlasts the protégé's stay in the graduate programme.

Though much more work needs to be done on mentoring outside the West, what evidence there is on this process and its attendant role there suggests that both concepts may be poorly understood. For instance, Kanan and Baker (2002) interviewed

beginning Palestinian teachers about their understanding of the attributes of a good mentor. The authors found that, in answering the interview questions, these teachers did not differ substantially from their colleagues in other countries, and that all were concerned with professional and educational needs. Nevertheless these Palestinians had trouble identifying with the Western idea of mentor. Such is not, apparently, a locally recognised role.

### What is a mentor?

Although mentoring programmes like those of CAHSPR and AMFY are formal, given that they are organised by and carried out within a formal organisation, a good deal of mentoring, indeed possibly most of it, takes place elsewhere, on an informal plane. Formally or informally, a mentor is someone who, with regard to a particular area of life, is both trusted and respected by a protégé, where trust and respect are based on a significant level of experience and knowledge that the latter believes the former to have. Superiority in this regard is critical, for why would the protégé accept an equal, or an inferior, in this role when superior experience and knowledge are what the protégé seeks. According to the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, fifth edition, the term mentor stretches back through French and Latin to the ancient Greek *Mentōr*, the man who guided and advised Odysseus's son Telemachus.

The roles of private teacher and private tutor resemble that of mentor. But, to the extent the first two get remunerated for their efforts, as a partial or full-time livelihood (which seems to happen often), they begin to separate themselves from the third. Additionally teachers and tutors are commonly paid to perform a widely-recognised, albeit specialised, service such as giving piano lessons or instructing in a language. Here the deeper personal involvement typical of the mentor-protégé relationship is normally absent. That is, the student-teacher, student-tutor tie is less

intimate, enduring, and broad ranging compared with the one a mentor has with a protégé. But when a teacher or tutor provides the desired service free of charge, as the leisured mentor does exclusively, all three roles begin to blur. By the way the mentor-protégé relationship, though profound, is nonetheless still typically one that is segmented. In other words this dyad is not as broad-ranging as, say, the marital dyad or a long and profound friendship, two kinds of ties that commonly extend deeply into many areas of each person's life.

At least in Western society teachers, tutors, and mentors have come to be differentiated from "coaches." Today the latter constitute an occupational role, in the sense that they are remunerated for it as a livelihood. Moreover, according to the website of the International Coach Federation ([www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)), coaches are in the process of professionalising. That is they are striving to be recognised as professionals in the sociological sense of the word: to be identified and defined in harmony with theory developed in the sociological study of the professions (e.g., working to establish formal credentials, training programmes, standards of practice, criteria of excellence). Yet all four advising roles, mentoring included, share the same hoped-for outcome: improved attainment of important goals and enhanced personal lifestyle of a protégé, or in the case of the coach, a client, both accomplished through a one-on-one relationship with an advisor. As for personal trainers they, too, can be seen as part of the coaching group, in that this expert offers a remunerated, specialised service centred, in this instance, on the diet, habits, lifestyle, and physical conditioning of, typically, wealthy clients.

Moreover some coaches serve not only individuals, but also various groups. They may advertise their expertise in working with teams, offering a service known in some sectors as "team building." Others counsel groups of individuals, ranging from families to units of employees organised in ways other

than as teams. All this is hardly surprising, in that the advice-giving coach of today is modelled, to significant degree, after his counterpart in team sport. Yet, when coaches in sport coach, they often advise individuals on matters of training, technique, and strategy. So it seems reasonable to extend the term in this fashion.

Such extension also reaches beyond the world of work into that of leisure. Thus, during my study of barbershop singers (Stebbins, 1996), certain quartets said they occasionally invited a local "coach" to counsel them on dress, choreography, harmonic balance, and other artistic concerns. As near as I could tell no coach was ever paid for this service. The coach was, invariably, a respected local singer, whose training and experience were highly regarded and whose only reward for coaching were the rewards of serious leisure (discussed in the next section). I have also heard of coaches operating in local jazz circles, where they offer musical advice to small combos and big bands. In neither of these examples do the coaches find themselves in profound interpersonal relationships, however, for each is advising a group of singers or instrumentalists.

### **Mentoring as leisure**

The empirical base of this exploration of the concepts of mentor and mentoring and of the proposition that the latter is leisure is built from two sources. One is the author's personal experience with mentoring a number of graduate students in the social sciences. The other is a sub-sample of nine mentors serving with AMFY. As part of a larger qualitative/exploratory investigation of a sample of participants in Canadian, leisure-related grassroots associations, they were interviewed about the rewards and costs of their mentoring (unpublished data collected for the study described in Stebbins, 2005).

As suggested by this empirical base, for the unpaid teacher, tutor, and mentor, mentoring

is, at bottom, a kind of leisure. This assertion is founded on the assumption that unpaid mentoring (teaching, tutoring) is also uncoerced activity, pursued because the mentor (teacher, tutor, advisor) finds it in some way agreeable. If this assumption is valid, the next question, for me at any rate, is what kind of leisure is this: serious, casual, or project-based? (All three forms are defined and discussed in Stebbins, 2006, chap. 1.)

My answer to this query is that mentoring amounts to a distinctive kind of career, or serious leisure, volunteering. That is mentoring stands apart from tutoring, coaching, and the like, in part, because the former lasts significantly longer both as a role and as a foundation for a deep interpersonal relationship. As in all volunteering – this holds, too, for tutoring, teaching, and coaching – there also is a target of benefits, referred to here as the protégé. But only mentoring is substantially motivated by a focused altruism, a strongly-held attitude that disposes the mentor to help another because of concern for that person's welfare or satisfaction, if not both. Though altruism is a quintessential feature of volunteering, research nevertheless makes clear that, generally, volunteering is also characterised by a self-serving, self-interested component. So this altruism is, in effect, "relative altruism," with "pure, other-serving altruism" being extremely rare (Smith, 1981).

It is the self-interested facet of altruism that brings us to the leisure qualities of both it and mentoring. All leisure, the serious form most certainly included, is self-interested activity.

*Serious leisure* is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 1992; 2001). Yet, if mentoring is to be considered serious leisure, it must evince the six distinguishing qualities of that form of leisure (Stebbins, 1992, pp. 6-7).

Turning to the first of these six, a mentor must be reasonably available to guide the protégé, making thereby an effort to deliver the desired service. Furthermore the mentor, to function properly in this role, must be able to relate this expertise to the particular circumstances of the protégé and, in so doing, be willing and able to persevere when the going gets tough. Second, as the protégé moves along through time toward his or her mentored goals, the mentor should find, with the protégé, a sense of career in this march toward personal betterment of the latter. Third, the role of mentor implies that he or she has accumulated considerable relevant knowledge and experience, and will be on hand for some time to speak about it with the protégé.

Fourth, some of the benefits of mentoring experienced by the mentor have already been noted by Zey (1991), who studied mentoring in corporations. He observed the following: as a result of their counselling, mentors are sometimes rewarded with career advancement, development of an informational network, access to a trusted advisor (i.e., the protégé who can eventually provide the mentor with non-threatening ideas and critiques), and the sort of self-fulfillment that comes with helping someone who greatly appreciates this effort. Harvey (2005) found, in his study of teaching librarians who were attending conferences, that some of them were motivated to mentor junior colleagues as an expression of a desire to "give something back" to their profession. Fifth, as for unique ethos and social world – another of the six distinguishing qualities of serious leisure (see Stebbins, 1996, chap. 1 for the most recent theoretic integration of these two concepts) – their development appears to be comparatively thin. Mentoring engenders deep dyadic relationships, which however, have few of the features of the social world as conceptualised by Unruh (1980). Still there is a real ethos here in the spirit of the dyadic relationship in which the two find themselves, as manifested in shared attitudes, practices, values, beliefs, goals, and so on. Sixth, there is in mentoring, clearly, a

valued, albeit certainly localised, identity for the mentor, as someone who routinely gives valuable advice to another.

The core activity of mentoring is the process of giving that advice. This situation, though one of leisure for the mentor, is not necessarily defined as such by the protégé. The second may find the proffered advice odious, difficult to execute, perhaps initially, even of questionable value. But, if the mentoring relationship is strong – the mentor is truly respected – the advice will be heeded, even if to the protégé, this all seems like some sort of coercion or unpleasant obligation, anything but leisure. Or, even if the advice is generally and genuinely agreeable, it may be, so far as concerns the protégé, related to gainful employment, not at all a matter of free-time interest. Nonetheless, some leisure enthusiasts, operating as amateurs, hobbyists, or career volunteers, could conceivably, be guided by mentors. If so such protégés would themselves most likely number among the heavily involved and committed core devotees in the activity in question, rather than the comparatively lightly involved and committed moderate devotees or participants (these levels of enthusiast are defined and inter-related in Stebbins, 2006, and Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003).

Furthermore, for the mentor, the act of mentoring appears to be motivated by several of the ten rewards of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2001, pp. 13-14). In mentoring they are, most notably, self-enrichment (e.g., from the close emotional tie with the protégé, from the thrill of watching that person grow and succeed), self-actualisation (e.g., gained by learning through mentoring more about the shared area of expertise), and self-expression (of acquired knowledge, experience, possibly skill). In fact the nine respondents in the sub-sample of AMFY mentors, identified these three as their top rewards, weighting them by degree of importance in the order presented here. On the social side there is, additionally, the reward of social attraction, as experienced through the interper-

sonal relationship with the protégé. Indeed leisure-based dyadic relationships, in themselves, incline their members toward participation within that "organisational" framework (Stebbins, 2002; 2005).

As several scholars have argued (this literature is reviewed in Stebbins, 2006, chap. 1), serious leisure experiences also have a negative side. Following this line of reasoning, I have always asked my respondents to discuss the costs they find in their serious leisure, namely, its dislikes, tensions, and disappointments. So far, because the costs tend to be highly specific to each serious leisure activity, it has been impossible to develop a general list of costs at the level of detail and conceptual sophistication that has been reached for rewards. Thus each activity studied to date has been found to have its own constellation of costs, which as the respondents from AMFY saw them, are invariably and heavily outweighed in importance by the activity's rewards. That is, every serious leisure activity contains its own combination of tensions, dislikes and disappointments, which each participant must confront in some way. Or, in the language of the leisure constraints perspective (Jackson, 2005), all serious leisure participants must contend from time to time with some noticeable hindrances to their participation in their amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity. For instance, some mentors with AMFY expressed disappointment with the progress of the students they were mentoring, but such a sentiment was hardly poignant enough to drive the first from this highly rewarding kind of serious leisure. These volunteers, because their activity also offered certain powerful rewards, continued to regard it as especially fulfilling leisure.

Among the costs of mentoring is the requirement of being, so to speak, on call. The protégé may require the mentor's services at times when the second would prefer to be doing something else. And for mentors it is disappointing to watch their protégés fail or do poorly in areas where the first have been striving to generate success. Most of the

mentors in the subsample from AMFY also listed a disappointment or two, invariably having to do with the student they were mentoring. It was said to be disappointing when the student failed to show sufficient academic progress, failed to come to a planned event or get-together, or neglected to come to a prearranged meeting of the two. One respondent observed:

There have been disappointments. For example, the student didn't show up a few times and this was disappointing. We eventually sorted this problem out by my saying to the student that he should call when he was ready. He eventually did, and we met, but then the student brought a friend with him.

Another recounted how

I had gone out of my way to plan extracurricula activities for me and my student, and then he cancels on him. But that is not so much the organization, it is more frustration with the student. When this happens I feel like he is regressing. There is a constant building up and fading with my relationship with him because of his age.

Mentoring seems freighted with possible disappointments, which the mentors from AMFY were aware of and took in stride. That is, they offset them with the strongly positive rewards they also experienced.

### **Becoming a mentor**

It is possible that many mentors, especially those taking up the role for the first time, have only a sketchy idea of the rewards awaiting them. If abruptly asked to serve as mentor by a would-be protégé, the flattery or honour of being thus invited by this person may be sufficient to encourage the first to accept the invitation. Of course there will be details to negotiate, for example what the mentor must do, when, where, how, and how often. And the needs of the second may be such that the first feels unable to meet them, the result being

that the anticipated mentoring relationship fails to take off.

Other mentoring relationships would seem to drift into place, with neither party being fully aware that, until long into the relationship, this is happening. Indeed there are probably objectively identifiable mentoring relationships that neither person recognises as such. So, a friend or relative might serve for years in this capacity in a certain area of life, while having little or no sense that this dyad is based, significantly, on mentoring. Mentoring can therefore occur unknowingly, accomplishing what mentors and protégés everywhere generally hope to gain, namely, reaching the important goals and enhancing the personal lifestyle of the protégé. The mentor may be linguistically a mentor, as defined in ancient Greece, but this role in modern Western society is far from being universally recognised by that name.

## Conclusions

Mentoring, it has been argued here, is a kind of volunteering; a mix of altruistic and self-interested action centred on advising and supporting, through expertise and experience, another person, the protégé. As such this is unusual altruism, for most of the time altruism sparks individual action toward collective targets such as groups, organisations, social classes, even nations. People altruistically give to the poor, help out at a sporting event, donate blood for an unknown set of possible users, serve on a board of directors for an arts organisation, and so on. By contrast mentoring is small scale; only one person is intended to benefit from the mentor's advice.

Small-scale altruism holds advantages for both mentor and protégé. One of these is immersion in a deep, unique, attractive interpersonal relationship. Another is direct feedback to the mentor about efforts he or she makes on behalf of the protégé, while the latter can often receive, sometimes quickly, feed-

back from the former. Feedback to the mentor is not necessarily always positive and, however evaluated, may still take some time to incubate. But mentors eventually learn whether their protégés have followed their advice, whether they have succeeded, whether they appreciate all the mentors have done for them. On the other hand protégés seem to learn fairly quickly what their mentors think of their efforts and progress. It is different in the larger spheres of, for example, general volunteering, donating blood, assisting at a sporting event, and helping direct a charitable organisation, which for the most part, fail to return to their volunteers (or donors) feedback of this close personal sort.

Indeed, today, much of volunteering is done in the impersonal environment of large-scale, formally-run projects and groups. This kind of activity appeals to many people who, in various ways, experience leisure there. And, among all the advising roles discussed in this article, coaching seems most likely to become widely formalised, even while the personal, dyadic relationship of coach and protégé also seems destined to persist. But, for those possessing the qualifications valued by a would-be protégé, who crave a volunteer experience different from most others, one more intimate, one more easily controlled by the volunteer, they may want to try mentoring. Since the opportunity for truly informal mentoring is not readily available for some people, where they have this interest, they must seek it in more formalised organisational settings such as AMFY. Possibly the most fruitful way to learn about formal opportunities to engage in this activity is to contact the local volunteer centre. Still if my observation is valid – mentoring is largely informal – would-be mentors seeking a formal mentoring role could well be frustrated in their search.

One last point, intentionally saved until now, to benefit from having fully considered mentoring as career volunteering: could we not conceive of mentoring as an amateur activity, with its professional counterpart being

coaching (see Stebbins, 1992, pp. 9-10, for a basic discussion of amateurism)? The reason for rejecting classification of it as amateurism is that mentoring as leisure diverges from coaching along the lines of at least four differentiating conditions. First, mentors, though experts in a certain specialty or area of life, are still not trained, even partially, to mentor people (formal mentoring is something of an exception here). By contrast coaches receive extensive training in psychology and counseling, which even in formal mentoring appears to be uncommon. Second, mentors are motivated by a high level of altruism not found among amateurs, or for that matter, hobbyists. Third, lacking any link with coaching as a profession, mentors, unlike amateurs, are not guided by its standards of professionalism. Instead mentors engage in "delegated activity," in the sense that their protégés have asked for help. And it follows, as the fourth differentiating condition, that mentors, compared with amateurs (and hobbyists), see themselves as helping someone else (conditions 2 through 4 are considered in Stebbins, 1992, p. 18, Table 1).

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