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An Assessment and Outcomes of Fourteen Author-Engaged Mentoring Types Over the Evolution of "Mentorship" from an Idea to a Culture

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Abstract

First described in the 1980s, mentorship has evolved from an emerging idea to a well-established culture. As such, a concomitant understanding of "mentor", "mentee", and "mentorship" is indicated—something currently lacking. In response, this work examines the author's fourteen types of mentoring relationships, over 39 years, regarding outcomes of peer-reviewed publications. The results demonstrate that mentors are most effective when they possess applicable experience compared to their mentees, experience considered by the mentees as having the potential to aid in their ability to solve a problem. In this respect, mentees require a particular self-awareness to identify that they have a solvable problem, anticipate a solution, and can effectively utilize the mentor's experience. Therefore, mentees are not equivalent to protégés, who, with their mentor, develop their careers and psychosocial competencies. The basis of mentorship is problem-solving for mentees, in contrast. Consequently, most productively, mentees choose their mentors, rather than having them assigned. Therefore, much of the effort in organizing matches for advancing the mentorship culture can be misguided and unproductive. In contrast, effective mentorship matching aids a relevant self-awareness in mentees and provides them with options for selecting mentors who are willing and able to share their pertinent problem-solving knowledge.

Keywords: mentorship; mentor; mentee; problem-solving; self-awareness; mentoring

1. Introduction

The idea of mentorship as a distinct topic for study began with two peer-reviewed publications in 1983 [1,2]. Both works follow the insights of a 1980 doctoral thesis on the theme [3] by the same author of publication [1] that defined mentorship by a particular process undertaken between a younger person and an older one in phases: Initiation (lasting between six months and a year), Cultivation (two to five years), Separation (six months to a two years), and Redefinition (an indefinite period leading to friendship). Publication [1] does not name the younger person in the mentor relationship. However, [2] refers to the younger person as the protégé(e), concluding that mentorship is "a critical on-the-job training development tool for career success for both men and women".

By 2007, based on a systematic review of mentoring, publication [4] collected thirteen disparate definitions of the term that had emerged between 1983 and 2005. To develop the theory of mentorship, this 2007 review contrasts mentoring with formal training and with socialization based on five variables: (1) number of participants, (2) relationship, (3) recognition, (4) needs fulfillment, and (5) knowledge utility. What differentiated mentoring from the other two forms of career advancement in this systematic review was that the relationship is: (1) a dyad, (2) informal and unequal in terms of knowledge, (3) acknowledged for role enhancement, (4) fulfilling the needs of the two voluntary participants, and (5) work-related, driven by the self-interest of both participants.

"Mentee" was a cautiously introduced term in 1990 [5]. Still, by the 2007 review [4], the person with less knowledge in the relationship is referred to exclusively as the "protégé". Yet, in 2022,

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although a publication on demystifying mentorship [6] claims to follow a 1993 National Education definition of mentorship that refers to the less experienced person as the protégé [7], the article itself uses the term "mentee" exclusively. This evolution comes with increasing attention to a 1985 paper [8] that suggests prudently that peer mentoring is an "alternative" to mentoring between older and younger persons. In 2018, research on this topic was limited [9]. It grew, as of a 2021 review [10]. And, after 2022, peer mentoring was considered an expectation in successful mentorship [11,12]. Additionally, group mentoring emerged as another component in the development of the idea of mentorship [13,14], in contrast to the earlier view that mentorship depends on a dyad. Each of these changes helped reduce the dominance of the term "protégé" in mentorships.

Mentorship as an idea then evolved into a mentorship culture [15] when workplaces and educational institutions began to establish policies and procedures regarding it, with a view to accountability, openness, flexibility, and understanding, based on research demonstrating that such mentoring is effective for personal and professional development [16]. The goal in creating a mentoring culture was to foster collaboration and learning in support of organizational advancement [17]. However, in the development of cultural safeguards and opportunities to define the culture of mentoring [18], consideration of why the need for mentoring arises was not the issue.

The assumption in this mentorship culture is that the need for mentoring is psychologically innate to both employees and students as members of organizations [19]. The neglect is recognizing that mentoring is necessary only when there is a problem that an employee or student wants to solve [20], and they consider that how to solve it is by referring to the living memory of someone who has experienced this same problem themselves and, in the view of the mentee, has solved it successfully [21]. If it were self-evident to a mentee how to proceed in an employment or educational practice, the need for mentoring would not arise. Therefore, the importance of problem-solving must be recognized as the core reason for mentorship [22] when assessing its success as a culture. In this regard, ideal mentorship arises when a mentee with a problem to solve seeks out a mentor, and the person they approach is someone the mentee considers has previously solved this problem and does not feel burdened in providing the relevant information to the mentee.

A 2008 study of healthcare professionals, published in 2011, substantiated this ideal with five themes defining an outstanding mentor: (1) admirable personal qualities, 2) tailoring support individually, 3) strong time commitments, 4) a personal/professional balance, and 5) role model setting international standards for mentorship [23]. A 2016 study of undergraduate psychology students, which asked "Who is your ideal mentor?" identified three qualities: guidance, understanding, and role modeling ethical values [24]. The consideration is that these differences arise because employees possess more self-awareness regarding what represents a problem in their field compared with students—something that is improved with increased experience, as recognized in a 2015 study [25].

An example of this ideal form of mentorship that transcends the distinction between employees and students in their assessment of mentors is the 1999 "hole in the wall" experiment, regarding an embedded, Internet-connected computer in a wall facing a slum in Kalkaji, New Delhi, India. Having never seen a computer before, children between 5 and 16 years old began to use it immediately, although they had limited knowledge of the English language needed to understand functions related to computing. Unaided by adults, within a few days, they taught themselves the basic operations of the computer, with those who had acquired a computer skill informing others of their discovery if asked by their peers [26]. Several of these computers were later installed in other locations with similar results [27]. This type of mentorship was ideal because the children wanted to understand how to use the new machine, and some were more successful than others. At the same time, once learning a feature, they were willing to share their knowledge with others working on the same problem. Importantly, the knowledgeable ones provided their results incidentally, rather than as teachers, and their age was irrelevant—in some cases, younger children solved the problems faster than older ones.

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Keeping in mind this ideal type of mentorship, this study examines mentorship research in relation to the long and varied history of mentorship by this author from 1987 until 2026. The aim is to reveal various types of mentorship during this period, their level of success, and how their outcome relates to the development of the culture of mentorship during these years, compared with reports of mentorship in peer-reviewed publications. The conclusions are that mentorship is most effective when (1) the mentee selects the mentor regarding a problem, (2) the mentor is aware of how to solve the problem, (3) the mentee can incorporate the mentor's solution to solve their problem, (4) other factors regarding mentor apart from problem solving are irrelevant, and (5) there is no expectation of continuing the relationship beyond solving the relevant problem.

2. Materials and Methods

The materials of this study concern narratives of each of the mentorship relationships in which the author has participated from 1987 to 2026. Their examination uses the method of chrononarratology [28], in which historical change is examined systematically through narrative. The presentation of each form of mentorship is in order of its occurrence. The results of each mentorship relationship are then compared with the range of peer-reviewed publications relevant to the particular form of mentorship before continuing to the next type of mentorship relationship that the author experienced. The purpose is to demonstrate that (1) there are many forms of mentorship, (2) the most successful were regarding a solvable problem identified by the mentee, (3) the only relevant concern was that the mentor seemed to the mentee to have the ability to solve the problem, (4) the idea of mentorship evolved institutionally into a culture of mentorship over time, and (5) formalizing the culture of mentorship often lessened the likelihood of success for the mentorship relationship.

3. Results

Between 1987 and 2026, this author participated in fourteen different mentoring relationships. Some were dyads, and some were group mentoring. Some were to solve a particular problem; others were the outcome of programs designed by the author or an institution. Some were short-lived, others lasted for decades. Some were a positive experience for both mentee and mentor, some were positive only for the mentee, and some were positive for neither.

The fourteen types of mentorship relationships are as follows (1) a president mentoring a vice president, (2) a graduate studies representative helping a political refugee, (3) a graduate program developer admitting graduate students, (4) a medical program administrator sending medical students to volunteer in a Costa Rican program, (5) a mother facilitating the intentions of her children (6) a concerned older person aiding a fragile younger one, (7) a founder advising students at a school, (8) an alumna in a college career mentorship program, (9) an alumna concerned for a college student (10) the facilitator of an in-person group mentorship program, (11) an alumna in a graduate mentorship program, (12) an alumna in an online meet-up mentorship program, (13) the facilitator of an online group mentorship program, and (14) the facilitator of an online one-on-one mentorship program. These fourteen types of mentorship relationships represent the subsections of the Results section to follow. Table 1 presents the years that each type of mentorship was in place. As of 2026, only five mentorships remain: those with my children, students at the school I co-founded, a past student of my undergraduate college, participants of the online mentorship meet-up program, and participants in my online one-on-one mentorship program.

Table 1. Years of the mentorship relationship for each of the twelve types engaged in by the author over 39 years, where the column heading numbers represent the subsection heading numbers of the Results section.

Year	3.1.	3.2.	3.3.	3.4.	3.5.	3.6.	3.7.	3.8.	3.9	3.10	3.11.	3.12.	3.13.	3.14.
1987	X													
1988	X													
1989		X												

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1990	X	X										
1991		X										
1992		X										
1993		X	X									
1994		X	X									
1995		X	X									
1996		X		X								
1997				X								
1998				X								
1999				X								
2000				X								
2001				X								
2002				X								
2003				X	X							
2004				X	X							
2005				X	X							
2006				X	X							
2007				X	X	X						
2008				X	X	X	X					
2009				X	X	X	X					
2010				X	X	X	X					
2011				X	X	X	X	X				
2012				X	X	X	X	X				
2013				X	X	X	X	X				
2014				X	X	X	X	X				
2015				X	X	X	X	X	X			
2016				X	X	X	X	X	X			
2017				X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
2018				X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
2019				X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
2020				X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
2021				X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
2022				X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X
2023				X		X	X	X		X	X		X
2024				X		X		X		X	X		X
2025				X		X		X		X			X
2026				X		X		X		X			X

3.1. Political Mentorship

In 1987, the then 10,000-person graduate student body of the University of Toronto acclaimed me as their president for the 1987/88 academic year. As such, I inherited my vice president, who had already served two terms as vice president under the leadership of a former president. During the initial years of his vice presidency, I had been a departmental representative on the Graduate Students' Union (GSU). Consequently, I had witnessed his frustration in trying to accomplish things under the former president, who took a laissez-faire attitude regarding the presidency—letting the GSU evolve organically. My leadership method was instead directional. I instituted decision-making at meetings that required the participation of each departmental representative. Moreover, it was the role of the GSU, in my mind, to respond to all graduate school matters that might affect the lives of graduate students. The vice president observed how I changed the way the GSU functioned from a reactive body to a proactive force. This change lessened his frustration. It led him to ask me for help to solve GSU-related problems that had been under his jurisdiction during the previous two years.

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We were able to accomplish a significant amount that year as a dyad in improving the lives of graduate students. Although the two of us have kept in touch sporadically over the years, with the end of my presidency came the end of our mentoring relationship.

Significant in this mentorship were several factors: (1) there was no formal mentorship arrangement, (2) the vice-president selected me as a mentor because the type of change I brought to the GSU aligned with what he valued personally, (3) we worked together, and (4) a female was the mentor to a male mentee. In political mentorship, (1) having no formal arrangement, (2) the mentee selecting the mentor based on personal values, (3) the working relationship being direct, and (4) a female mentoring a male mentee, all were irregular in 1987 [29], and are still so today [30].

3.2. Mentoring a Chinese Political Refugee

On October 4, 1989, I was representing the School of Graduate Studies at the annual U of T Day as the University of Toronto Director of Graduate Alumni Affairs when a very thin, somewhat disheveled Chinese man approached me to enroll in the Computer Science Department. He let me know that he had been one of the organizers of the Tiananmen Square protests from June 4–5 earlier that year and, after making his way during the last few months as part of a special program organized with the University of Minnesota, he had to find a graduate program at the University of Toronto willing to enroll him and offer him a full scholarship or he would be required to return to China to face punishment. Additionally, unless he obtained a large enough scholarship, he could not buy back the release of his wife and son, who were being held captive in his place. He informed me that he had been a university faculty member before the pro-democracy demonstrations in China. However, as he was of age to attend graduate school during the Cultural Revolution, when Chinese people were unable to obtain a higher education degree, he did not have a PhD. Upon hearing his story, I wanted to help him, but it was now October, and there were no additional spaces available for admission to the Computer Science Department. Recognizing his desperation, I recalled from my days as president of the GSU that the Department of Education had its own computer science program and that it offered scholarships to students with a greater monetary value than those of other departments. I advised him to approach the Department of Education and explain his story, saying that he wanted to enroll in computer science. I said he was likely to get in because of his caliber. He quickly left to apply. Later that day, he returned, smiling. He said that he had enrolled and had received a full scholarship.

Once he had completed his graduate program in record time, he returned to ask me if I knew of any place that might hire him immediately. I happened to be aware of a new company created to educate people on how to use personal computers. I knew that they needed someone to write computer programs to support the curriculum. I offered him the name and address of the company and phoned the CEO to recommend him as an outstanding computer programmer. He left immediately after to meet with the CEO. A few hours later, I received a call from the CEO who said that she had hired him on the spot as she had never met a computer programmer with such extensive experience and capability. The Chinese computer science graduate worked for this company until he was able to save enough money to obtain the release of his wife and child in China. By the time he was able to get them to Canada, he was entirely self-sufficient. Nevertheless, for many years after, he regularly kept me informed of the progress of his employment and family. Ultimately, he moved to Silicon Valley and became the vice-president of a computer programming company.

There were several unique aspects regarding this mentorship. One was the age difference. As the mentor, I was at least 15 years younger than my mentee. A little less unusual was that I was a woman mentoring a man who was only beginning to use English daily. Additionally, I mentored him although I was not a computer scientist. What was most memorable about the mentorship was its initiation under dire conditions for the mentee. As such, the aim of the mentee was not merely to solve problems; it was to save himself and his family.

There are a few publications on age differences between mentors and mentees. Of those that exist, the focus is on older mentors working with younger mentees [31–33]. There is one 2025 study

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on younger mentors mentoring older mentees [34]. It is also regarding women mentoring men. Its focus is on removing barriers for women in promoting sexual equality. In planning for social change, this type of mentoring by younger women to older men is very different than the mentorship relationship I had with this older Chinese man. All that was relevant to our mentoring was that I had information that was valuable to my mentee. I was his mentor for no additional reason. There is also a lack of research on mentorships that span different disciplines. Instead, the focus is on mentorship programs applicable to various disciplines [35]. Yet, it was because of the disparate information I had gained both as president of the GSU and in my role as Director of Graduate Alumni Affairs that I was able to identify a workable solution regarding enrollment in a relevant graduate program for my mentee. When mentoring mentees in dire circumstances, studies have shown that mentors become overwhelmed [36,37]. This outcome was not the case for me regarding the Chinese computer scientist. The difference was that, unlike the mentees in these studies, he was determined to apply all the resources available to him to find a way out of his situation. He was self-aware, understood the problems he encountered, knew what a solution should resemble, and believed that I was the key as a mentor in providing him with the information he lacked to proceed on his own. The consideration is that self-awareness in mentees is complementary to the nature of mentoring [38], such that a negative impact on mentoring relationships can result when self-awareness is lacking [39].

3.3. Graduate Student Mentorship

As the Program Coordinator of the University of Toronto Centre for Bioethics from 1989 to 1996, one of my roles was to create the graduate program associated with the Centre and to admit students to that program. In determining which applicants were appropriate for association with the Centre, I would meet individually with each. I would ask them to tell me what brought them to the Centre that day. From the narratives they provided, I would learn whether they were a good fit with the Centre. If so, I would find out what they wanted to accomplish in bioethics. Learning this, I would compare their goals with the faculty members associated with the Centre to match them with an appropriate faculty advisor for their graduate program. In this regard, my role as a mentor was comparable to that of a matchmaker. Applicants usually followed my advice. They considered me to be someone able to solve the problem of appropriate supervision when suggesting a match between a student and a particular faculty member. Some neglected my advice, choosing their own supervisor. The results were neither satisfying for the student nor for their supervisor. In these cases, students either switched supervisors after further consultation with me or left the bioethics program.

Although students might come to me for program-related information once admitted to the Centre, our mentorship relationship was limited to finding a good fit between supervisor and student during the initial intake process. To this extent, I fulfilled some of the roles that researchers consider relevant to a mentorship relationship with graduate students—I helped them reflect on their goals by increasing their self-efficacy [40]. However, in other regards, this limited mentoring relationship with graduate students is unusual in the literature, which focuses on mentorships to facilitate graduate student networking in their chosen discipline [41].

3.4. Mentorship to Support a Costa Rican Medical Program

In 1993, as part of a program between the University of Toronto and the University of Costa Rica in cardiovascular risk factors and diabetes mellitus that I had initiated beginning in 1989, I was charged with formalizing a method of sending medical students from the University of Toronto to Costa Rica to research the outcome of the two-university program. For the first two years, I would meet with all the newly enrolled medical students together to inform them about the program and ask if any wanted to participate. The first year eleven students took the opportunity to be part of the program. I met with them, both as a group and individually, to determine what they hoped to achieve with their participation. Although all of them were clear at that point that they wanted to engage in research that would complement their medical studies, in the end, only two of the students wrote a paper together that was published several years later. This publication remains regularly cited in the

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field, in English, Spanish, and French [42–44]. Of the remaining students, some wanted to write up their research; however, these desires did not produce the intended results. In the second year, only two medical students chose to participate in the program. However, it was clear from the beginning that one of these students considered herself very entitled and wanted to go to Costa Rica, not to conduct research, but for a vacation. When I informed her that I didn't think she was a good match for the program, she told me she would go to the Dean of Medicine to have this program stopped if she couldn't go. Reluctantly, I let her participate, only to learn later from my Costa Rican colleagues that she had provided nothing to the program, although demanding attention of their hospitality. Her behavior also affected the other medical student participating in the program, making it impossible to conduct research. From my perspective as a mentor, this was a failed mentorship. Consequently, for the following year, I made a change. I did not send any medical students to Costa Rica. Instead, I mentored a practicing nurse who was a bioethics student with an interest in contributing to the program in Costa Rica. Unlike most medical students from the previous years, the nurse was able to make a substantial contribution to the program.

Although there were aspects of this mentorship program I created that achieved their intended purpose of matching mentees who wanted to conduct research in an international context, in other respects, the mentorship program failed. Those mentees who were successful (1) had an idea of the type of research they wanted to conduct before heading to Costa Rica, (2) were willing and able to see their research to fruition, (3) had a desire to help the program succeed, both in Canada and Costa Rica, and (4) were willing to work with others participating in the program to achieve their goal. Those mentorships that were frustrated had mentees who had at least one of the following qualities. They were (1) unclear on what they wanted to research, (2) unable to carry through with their research intentions, or (3) wanted to use the program for self-interest unrelated to conducting research.

Since 2009, there has been recognition that success in medical student mentorship programs requires the mentee to take responsibility for their aspect of the collaboration [45]. Nevertheless, by 2016, two medical publications regarding the role of mentees stress that mentee must remember their self-interest [46], and recognize that mentorship is "a key for promoting the success of a mentee" [47]. Thus, this advice to medical mentees would not entice mentees of my program to question their level or type of participation. Nevertheless, a 2021 search of the current state of research on mentorship recognized that this advice to mentees was lacking [48]. The solution offered in that 2022 publication for these failed mentoring relationships was the need for mentorship training. However, by 2025, an editorial on the state of medical mentorship recognized that, rather than training, the primary requirement for mentees is their ability to self-reflect on whether they are ready for mentorship. This self-reflection includes trust in the relationship and gratitude for the opportunity to participate [49]. These were the qualities of the successful mentorship relationships in this program—success that was possible without mentorship training.

3.5. Children's Mentorship

Beginning with the birth of my son in 1996 and then my daughter in 1998, began two mentorship relationships beyond my role as a mother. My son was diagnosed early with autism (ASD), and my daughter, similarly, was identified expeditiously to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Both demonstrated intellectual and emotional strengths; however, their inability to meet social norms as expected meant that they often approached me with problems that they believed my experience would permit them to solve. I have been able to offer them advice regarding my experience. Their continuing success, both professionally and personally, has encouraged me to think that sustaining their mentorship has remained fruitful.

The literature discusses two perspectives on the idea of mentoring children with developmental disorders. The first is the mentorship of parents of such children by other parents in similar circumstances—an idea initially suggested in 1995 when mentees were viewed exclusively as protégés [50]. A 2024 scoping review on the topic of parent mentorship of children with

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developmental disorders focuses on the positive impact that such mentorships between parents have on the emotional well-being of parents [51]. A 2025 publication then offers practical advice on parent-to-parent mentorship of children with chronic conditions, including developmental disorders [52]. The second type of mentorship discussed in the literature regarding children with developmental disorders is peer-to-peer mentoring. A 2020 systematic review of this topic identified these programs as having a positive influence on the children [53]. Two later publications concern peer-to-peer mentorship of university-aged children. One article is about ADHD [54], and the other is on ASD [55].

What is missing from the publications on the mentorship of children with developmental disorders is studies on parents mentoring their children. Rather than considering that parents might be valuable mentors for their children, the focus of publications regarding mentoring and parents is the presumed inability of parents of such children to be effective in parenting. The purpose of the mentoring the parents receive is to improve their ability as parents, not as mentors. Similarly, the literature on peer-mentoring of university-age children with developmental disabilities is presented from the perspective that experiences of the children are necessarily outside the range of help that parents might provide as mentors. This neglect of research on the ability of parents to mentor their children with developmental disorders has meant that what could be a worthwhile mentoring relationship for these families has been ignored.

3.6. Mentorship Arising from Concern

In 2003, a highly intelligent and aware young woman I had known all of her life, one who was personally close to my family, suffered an experience that left her with symptoms of fibromyalgia. For an extended period, she spent her time in bed, unable to further her education or to work. She was at a loss for what she could do to help herself. Seeing that she was unable to regain her health using the standard and alternative medical means she tried, I began a process of mentorship with her. Although I was able to help her reenter society, the cost was her constant dependence on me for help in making any decision. Given the closeness of this young woman to my family, terminating the mentorship did not seem to be an option. Yet, the mentorship became twisted into hours-long calls that were intended not to improve her possibilities but, by taking up an inordinate amount of my time, lessen mine. The problems in this mentorship persisted until 2021, when the mentee decided I needed to erase all the messages and emails I had that concerned her and to delete her phone number. After doing as she asked and our daily contact ended, I noticed the immense amount of time I gained to pursue other activities than this draining mentorship. This mentee has now regressed to being unable to leave her home, with newly created reasons for her confinement.

I devoted extensive time and energy to this mentorship. I wanted my mentee to progress. The difficulty was that she wanted to take up my time; she did not want to improve. Therefore, this mentorship was ineffective for several reasons: (1) the mentee did not initiate it, (2) the mentee did not have an objective problem to solve, (3) the mentee did not recognize my experience as being relevant to making a positive change in her life, and (4) the reason the mentee participated was to make my life problematic. Thus, although I started this mentorship with hope, there was no actual reason it could be successful.

When mentees were still referred to as protégés in 2000, a created taxonomy provided the mentee's perspective of a negative mentoring relationship [56]. In 2022, tips for avoiding abusive mentors who use mentees as a source of labor were offered [6]. One 2024 publication refers to some mentors as anti-mentors with the intention of harming their mentees [57]. By 2025, more than half of mentees reported their mentorship relationships as failures [58]. What lacks consideration in any of these publications regarding an unsuccessful mentorship is the inappropriate treatment by a mentee of the mentor. The question is why I persisted in this mentoring relationship when nothing pointed to its success, and it was harming me. A 2024 publication that asked what drives mentors answers that benevolence is the primary mentoring motive, stating that the latest studies suggest the motives are prosocial [59]. The mentoring relationship I had with this long-time mentee is one that this 2024

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paper would characterize as "mismatch". The summary of the themes associated with a mismatch for the mentor is: disappointment, doubts about capabilities, and worrying about the mentee. Certainly, these themes resonate with me regarding this mentoring relationship.

3.7. A School Designed for Mentorship

In the 2006/07 academic year, I worked with eight other parents of ALPHA Alternative School and the Toronto District School Board to create Alpha II Alternative School—a grades 7-12 school for self-directed learners who make school-wide decisions by a form of consensus where the point of view of each person is combined in the outcome [60]. Its operation has been continuous since September 2007. The relationship adults have with the young people is not teacher-student, it is mentor-mentee. Based on their interests, mentees are assigned a mentor at the beginning of the year. However, a mentee can opt to switch their mentor if they choose. Both of my children attended Alpha II from 7th to 12th grade. Throughout Alpha II's history, as a co-founder, I have mentored young people, their parents, and the teachers. Concerning the creation of policies and procedures, my focus has been on developing the school's infrastructure. Mentees have chosen to work with me, as a continuing and regular participant in school activities, when their interests correspond with problems related to these aspects of the school. The mentorships end when the mentees consider that their difficulties are solved. Similarly, I have mentored teachers and several parents over the years regarding these same interests. Additionally, as a school co-founder, teachers and parents contact me for mentorship regarding their understanding of self-directed learning and the particular form of consensus decision-making that supports the school community.

As a continuously 100% publicly funded self-directed school, Alpha II is unique in the world. For this reason, how the school operates is not self-evident, and upholding its founding principles requires commitment by all those involved with the school. The understanding of what is foundational regarding the school has been maintained throughout its almost twenty-year history, resulting, in part, from my willingness to continue mentoring regarding fundamental aspects of the school. Mentorship on the basic principles of founding an institution is not the norm, as mentees focus on seeking information for their self-defined problems [61], rather than the problem of institutional consistency. In its mentorship focus on preserving an institution, a 2024 publication is alone [62]. However, the difference is that the mentorship program of this publication is to help students feel a sense of belonging. At Alpha II, young people enroll in the school because they already have a sense of belonging with the school's philosophy of education. Mentorships they, their parents, or the teachers have with me are in support of continuing the school's fundamental values to sustain their sense of belonging.

3.8. A College Career Mentorship Program

From October 2008 to April 2023, I participated yearly as a mentor in the Career Mentorship Program of my undergraduate college. During its first few years, mentees received emails about the various mentors who had joined the program, and they then selected their top three choices online. Once selected, college staff would match the mentees with the mentors. This type is a method of mentee-mentor matching supported by the literature [63,64]. Most often, students received their first choice. However, not always. What was found by staff in comparing the year-end results was that those students who had not received their first choice were generally unhappy with their match because it was not their first choice. The staff concluded that the problem lay in ranking the mentors. The solution was that staff would make the selections. Then, mentors and mentees would meet at an initial opening event.

Before meeting with their mentees, the staff met with mentors as a group to advise them to focus on what they might contribute to the mentorship, corresponding with the reason the mentees had joined the program. Once this matching program began, until the start of the pandemic, the mentorships I had with mentees were very productive. This, in contrast to years when I was not the first choice of my mentees, and their reason for participating in the program was purely to add the

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mentorship to their CV. Although there are publications that mention mentors using mentorships to pad their CVs [65,66]—as there is "a fine line between being comprehensive and padding" [67]—the literature does not cover mentees joining organized career mentorship programs for this reason. The closest that a publication comes to suggesting this possibility is one that instead focuses on the extent to which mentors sometimes participate in mentorships to the detriment of mentees [6].

With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings were no longer an option. Then, staff matched mentees and mentors, and their initial communication was by email. Although I remained with the program throughout the pandemic, the commitment of the mentees in contacting me to begin the mentorship over these years was negligible. It was clear that, during the pandemic, when the consideration was that the need for mentorship was greater than pre-pandemic times to counteract loneliness [68–71], this means of initiating mentorships was ineffective. Yet, even after the pandemic ended, the method of introduction remained the same. The lack of interest that mentees demonstrated in making initial email contact convinced me that my role as a mentor was no longer served in participating in this mentorship program, making 2023 the last year of my participation.

3.9. An Extended Serendipitous Mentorship

In 2011, I attended the opening reception of the Career Mentorship Program, the focus of the previous section. The intent of the reception was for the matched mentee and mentor to meet up. My assigned mentee did not attend the evening. As I was leaving, near the end of the event, I saw a young woman who looked distraught. Asking her what was wrong, she told me that her mentor was not in attendance. After informing her about myself and asking her about her background, I sensed she wanted me as her mentor. Confirmed when she willingly agreed to a mentorship.

Since that initial meeting, I have given career advice to this woman for over fifteen years. She messages me with a problem she is having trouble solving, and, over a series of texts, she determines when she thinks she has sufficient information to solve her problem. We rarely meet in person. Approximately 90% of our communication is by the Messenger App. Yet, even with only sporadic online communication, this woman has evolved from someone who viewed herself as unable to complete her undergraduate program, to graduating, then following several different career paths—each one closer to her ideal career.

According to this mentee, our mentorship has been life-saving for her. I have had the satisfaction of seeing a mentee successfully manage her career through her self-awareness of her goals, the problems she encounters, and understanding how my advice might help her solve her problems. This mentorship has been successful.

Given that this mentorship has been an extended career mentorship, the consideration might be that, rather than a mentee, this woman was my protégée. However, this is not correct. Although a 2025 publication insists that a protégé(e) and mentee are the same [72], it does not distinguish between those in a mentoring relationship who intend to follow the lead of the mentor in an organization (a protégé(e)) and those who are part of a mentorship to solve a self-identified problem (a mentee). Nevertheless, there are no publications that clarify this distinction.

One article defines the issue differently. This paper considers mentees and protégés as the same; however, it differentiates mentorship from sponsorship: mentorships offer advice, answer questions, and help strategize professional development while sponsorships promote the protégé/mentee to others for the career advancement of the protégé/mentee [73]. In contrast, if the focus is on distinguishing the ideal protégé, a 2000 publication notes that there are two types: (1) those who have ability and potential, and (2) those looking for help. In this paper, the advice is to choose the first type as a protégé [74]. It is evident that even when a distinction between a protégé and a mentee is lacking, a description of an ideal protégé differs from an ideal mentee—a person who begins with a self-defined problem to solve. With these various perspectives, it is clear that the role of the mentee has not been well-defined, and confusion regarding this role presents a reason for misunderstandings in mentorships [75].

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3.10. A Group Mentorship Program

From 2015 to 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, I facilitated a weekly in-person narrative research group that I designed to utilize a uniquely structured meeting to help reduce self-identified researcher burnout, held through the Department of Psychiatry at the Toronto Mount Sinai Hospital. Those who participated were researchers who had contacted me for a mentorship to help reduce their burnout. All of these prospective mentees were eager to join the structured Health Narratives Research Group (HeNReG). Regarding this period, a 2020 publication on the group concerns helping participants reduce their burnout [76]. What lacks discussion regarding this group is its impact on the mentor/mentee relationship.

Unlike the ideal form of mentorship, where the mentee demonstrates self-awareness by having a well-defined problem that they recognize is solvable by incorporating mentor experience, these mentees each self-identified as burned out. In a 2024 scoping review of mentorship interventions in postgraduate medical and STEM settings, the mention of burnout is fleeting, although group mentorship of researchers is examined in detail [77]. As such, the relationship between burnout and the success of researchers engaged in group mentorship is lacking in the literature. During the HeNReG meetings, the experience of burnout by mentees compromised their self-awareness and ability to recognize possible problem solutions. As a corollary, a 2025 publication found that researchers with self-awareness are better able to solve their problems and less likely to experience burnout [78]. As such, the result of the HeNReG was that the mentorship boundary was blurred, with the type of help equating to therapy. A 2024 publication on a group mentoring method referred to as executive coaching identifies the possibility of this blurring [79]. This paper concludes that mentors in these programs are ill-equipped to help mentees once they cross this boundary.

The aim of the HeNReG was not mentorship but burnout reduction. In this regard, the HeNReG was able to meet its goal of reducing burnout with each participant. However, as a mentorship program, there was a lack of longitudinal results. Participants often joined more than once over several years, expressing that their burnout, although reduced by the HeNReG meetings of the previous year, returned after the meetings ceased during the summer months. This type of problem was unrecognized in another burnout-reduction group mentorship program for clinical researchers, as the 2024 report of the program covered only the one nine-month program [80]. The returning nature of burnout in HeNReG participants pointed to additional psychiatric obstacles affecting them that mentees openly acknowledged, such as clinical depression. Consequently, the in-person meetings of the HeNReG had limited lasting value as mentorship programs.

3.11. Online Matching of Mentorship Between Alumni

In 2017, I became involved with a new online mentorship program called Ten Thousand Coffees offered in association with the University of Toronto. Initially, participants would write their biography in the online system and indicate if they were looking for mentors or mentees. Then, those looking for mentors would identify a potential mentor through the biographies and message them to organize a meeting. Articles written on collecting mentor biographies are for research about mentors. They do not concern examination by mentees [81,82]. As such, this method for forming mentorships was, and remains, novel in the literature. From 2017 until the start of the pandemic, this mentorship program regularly provided me with new mentees. Upon meeting with each of them in person, I would tell them about the HeNReG and ask if they were interested in continuing the mentorship through that structured program. All of them preferred to join, and did so, completing the program until the end of the academic year—some of them joining again in the years that followed.

Once the pandemic no longer permitted in-person meetings, the organizers decided that the entire mentorship would take place online in the Ten Thousand Coffees messaging platform. During this period of the mentoring program, an additional structural change meant that mentors were no longer selected by mentees based on the biography submitted by the mentor. Instead, the program administrators would match potential dyads. Creating dyads is a well-researched method and is found to be successful [83–85]. Each month, a new potential mentee was matched with me, providing

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more opportunities to work with mentees than in the past. However, now that the selection was made by the system, rather than the mentee taking the initiative to contact me, the percentage of mentees who responded to my initial messages was reduced.

Once the pandemic was over, mentors and mentees were again able to meet up for coffee. However, the matching method remained the same as during the pandemic. The result was that mentees became even less likely to respond to the messages the system sent out to contact the mentor. I write to every potential mentee matched with me monthly and suggest in my initial note to them a basis on which a mentorship relationship might be formed, given their submitted biography. Yet, now, fewer than 10% of those mentees the system matches with me ever respond to my messages. The mentees do not initiate the matching. Other additional ways of setting up in-person mentorships have been available since the end of the pandemic. Therefore, it is not surprising that mentees have generally lost interest in this form of mentorship. This type of disconnection from organized mentorship programs regards a general disengagement from higher education post-pandemic [86]. Moreover, with virtual mentoring post-pandemic, mentees are found to expect less from the match. Although these matches are convenient, they produce "a general field of tension" [87]. I continue with this mentorship program, although the percentage of potential mentees responding to my initial contact continues to dwindle.

3.12. Mentorship Between Graduate Students and Alumni

In September 2018, the graduate program I had attended for my graduate work invited me to participate in the first year of their graduate student mentorship program. Backed by research indicating that mentors receive insufficient organizational recognition for their mentorship contribution [88–90], this program began with a lauding of mentors in speeches at the opening reception, and games to play where mentors might win valuable prizes. The opening event was exciting, well-supported financially, and fun, ending with party favors for all mentors. Additionally, it provided the opportunity for mentors to meet the mentees selected for them by the program.

Each year of my participation in this mentorship program, I gained at least one mentee, sometimes two, even during the pandemic years when there was no opening reception. Every one of them opted to join my HeNReG for a structured mentoring experience. Yet, in the first year of an in-person opening reception after the pandemic, my two assigned mentees both let the Alumni Office know that they would not be attending the opening event of the mentorship program for that year—a common occurrence post-pandemic [86]. The Alumni Office still urged me to attend the event anyway. I did attend. The organizers recognized my continued commitment to the program in a speech, and I happened to win two of the games, gaining high-priced prizes. All of this attention was to make me know that the Alumni Office appreciated my participation. However, I also learned that my contribution was unwanted by my assigned graduate students. I knew this when, over the next few weeks, my assigned mentees did not respond to my emails.

The result: I felt the process was disingenuous. The main point seemed to be maintaining contact with dedicated graduates, in the hope that they would continue their involvement with the Alumni Office. Clearly, by 2023, post-pandemic, satisfying the needs of mentees was not the outcome. As I felt that other mentors should have a chance to gain acclaim, receive party favors, and win prizes participating in this Mentorship Program, 2023 was the final year of my participation in the program. Ultimately, I felt embarrassed by all the recognition I received. This type of embarrassment from organizational recognition of mentors has only recently been recognized in the literature [91].

3.13. Online Group Mentorship

As a result of the cancellation of all in-person meetings on 12 March 2020 [92] in response to the COVID-19 pandemic declared on 11 March 2020 [93], the final month and a half of the 2020/21 HeNReG meetings were held online rather than in-person. This practice continued until the final meeting of the 2021/22 academic year. There are publications on the effect (1) of moving the in-person HeNReG online to a private Facebook group regarding how the meeting changed [94], (2) on one

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aspect [95,96], and (3) regarding challenges to its ability to meet its aim of reducing burnout in researchers [97]. Unreported is the effect on the mentorship of the participants. These results are divisible into three different types of mentees of those who joined as a result of fulfilling mentorship assignments: (1) the Career Mentorship Programs organized by my undergraduate college, (2) Ten Thousand Coffees, and (3) the Mentorship Program of the department where I did my graduate work.

Each of the years during the pandemic when the HeNReG was online-only, a mentee of mine from the Career Mentorship Program participated, equaling three mentees (the first of these was regarding the last month of the 2019/20 year). Additionally, past mentees from other years of the same program rejoined the HeNReG to continue their participation. They continued because, as reported in their feedback forms, they enjoyed the group participation. The number of these additional past mentees as participants from this Career Mentorship Program equals seven. For those mentees who joined during the pandemic, their online participation was irregular, rather than weekly. Yet, their feedback forms indicated that they still felt the mentorship was valuable. The mentee from 2019/20 appreciated the online aspect for these reasons: (1) she did not have to travel, and (2) it kept her in touch with other researchers; nevertheless, she considered that some features of the program were hard to accomplish online. The 2020/21 mentee found the meetings "relieving" because they got her engaged during the pandemic. However, she also did not participate in all aspects of the program. That not all characteristics of research groups meeting online during the pandemic were transferable from previous in-person meetings is also the result of a 2021 investigation of the topic [98]. For the 2021/22 mentee, she stated that it was "incredibly helpful" to have several researchers asking her questions. This question-asking helped her to understand herself as a researcher better. Additionally, she stated, "Having a community of researchers who believe the person researching is important." A 2020 discussion paper on the value of this type of online interprofessional collaboration during the pandemic offers a similar conclusion to this mentee [99].

Regarding Ten Thousand Coffees, three mentees joined the online HeNReG during the pandemic years—two during the first partial year, one for the second year, and none in the final year. Additionally, one 2017/18 mentee from this program continued his participation throughout the pandemic. For those who were mentees of Ten Thousand Coffees for that academic year, their responses in their feedback forms included the following statements. After a month of online meetings, one mentee responded, "One of my favourite parts of HeNReG is the amazing people that it brings together, I really enjoyed hearing about people's stories and learning about all the different ways that others go about conducting their research. Thank you Carol!"— a quotation stressing the peer-mentorship aspect of the mentoring and my facilitation of that opportunity, unlike the other mentee from that year, who was introspective, "I still feel very far from what it means to 'do research' or to be a 'researcher'. Maybe that is why I wanted to join this group, because there should be a starting place for all these ideas to grow and slowly connect with one another."—a comment indicating that the mentee did not start the mentorship with a problem in mind. Rather, the reason for joining was to discover a problem to research. In the second year, when the Group was online the entire academic year, the new mentee from Ten Thousand Coffees made these observations when asked why she joined the HeNReG for her mentorship. The answer was similar to the second mentee participant from the previous year, "The reason why I want to participate in this group is that I want to meet new people and listen to others' stories during this process of my job search. I hope doing so will keep me motivated somehow." It is perhaps because the mentees from Ten Thousand Coffees were looking to make new relationships in joining the mentorship program that their focus was on interacting with new people to gain ideas exclusively. This reason for participating in mentorship programs was not well-studied until 2025 [100].

The graduate program mentorship participants had a greater focus on their research programs compared with those of Ten Thousand Coffees. For each of the three years of the online HeNReG, there was at least one participant from that mentorship program—in 2021/22, there were two. When asked why she was interested in a mentorship regarding the HeNReG, the mentee from 2019/20 responded, "Specifically, I am interested in curriculum integration and innovation; that is, studying

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the effectiveness of this form of learning that elicits an interactive and collaborative approach to post-secondary education." Yet, this response came only a month after online meetings. By the first year of meeting entirely online, resulting from COVID-19 restrictions, even students focused on their research for their mentorship commented most on the importance of the group in keeping people together. "I think having the knowledge of what other people are working on and having a means of connection through the group is really helpful to know who I can ask for support in my research." 2021/22 was the second full year of online meetings of the HeNReG resulting from the pandemic restrictions. The first of the mentees that year shared, "My academic research interest is in the technology and knowledge building and the impact of excessive use of technology in our learning capabilities." He stated that the HeNReG will continue to be of help to him "In being open." The second mentee from this program for this year provided this assessment of her research interest, "I have always been drawn to qualitative methods, specifically methodologies that are critical of academic structures and who owns knowledge and how knowledge is created…, so I was fascinated with wanting to learn how to elicit stories with (not from) participants that have social justice outcomes and be able to promote change, especially with people who have been historically marginalized and purposely left out of research and academia." Her assessment of the online HeNReG was as follows: "It's helpful to carve out time to write regularly. It's also helpful to read other participants' responses to see similarities and differences in writing. From what I read, many of us go through many of the same challenges, so it's nice to know you're not alone… It was nice to be a part of a group that's all working on research." A 2021 publication made this discovery for other online mentorship programs during the pandemic, that a feeling of not being alone in challenges was a predominant reason for participating in these mentorships [101].

3.14. Online Individual Mentorship

In reviewing the responses of mentees from the three organized mentorship programs who participated in the HeNReG during the pandemic, it is relevant that their view of the group for their mentorship as part of the HeNReG was positive. This positive view contrasts with my own view that the online group did not meet its intended aim—to have the participants interact with each other in asking questions regarding their online written comments. Such interaction was the foundation of the HeNReG when it was in-person, before the pandemic. However, when the HeNReG moved online, the participants chose to answer only those questions I put to them as the facilitator, leaving the questions of other group members unanswered. Consequently, by the end of the 2021/22 group meetings, with pandemic limitations still in place, I decided to end the online HeNReG and change it to a one-on-one process. Doing so produced a form of mentorship with me alone. One that used the HeNReG question-asking structure. It was called the Health Narratives Research Process (HeNReP). The details of the HeNReP are in [102].

2025/26 represents the fourth year of my offering the HeNReP to researchers who self-identify as burned out. Over the four years of the program, those who have participated in it originated from four sources, (1) the Career Mentorship Program of my undergraduate college, (2) Ten Thousand Coffees, (3) the Mentorship Program of my graduate school department, and (4) professionals contacting me directly to be part of the program with no ties to any mentorship program.

The mentees from the Career Mentorship Program were two, both during 2022/23. For the first of these mentees, I suggested she join the HeNReP as she was unsure of her career direction. Although she was eager to participate at the start, lacking any specific problem to solve regarding the mentorship, she left the process before its completion. In contrast to other mentees, she has maintained a personal connection with me. The second mentee from that program for this academic year similarly did not begin with a research question. She joined, interested in enrolling in medical school. This mentee almost completed the entire process. However, she did not finish it. In both these cases, the mentorship process was unsuccessful because the mentee felt uncomfortable with its one-on-one nature. Although there are publications regarding online mentoring during the pandemic for

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both group and individual mentorship, they do not consider the difference in the level of comfort mentees have between group mentorship and one-on-one [103,104].

Regarding the Ten Thousand Coffees mentorship program, the mentees I had who joined a HeNReP were two in 2022/23 and one in 2023/24—a person who carried over her mentorship from the preceding academic year. In the one-on-one HeNReP, a mentorship spanning more than one academic year was now possible. A unique feature of this program was that the mentees could determine their own schedule for participation [102]. Both of these mentees completed the process. Each had joined with a specific problem related to their mentorship. For the mentee of 2022/23, her problem was understanding the job market. Concerning how the HeNReP helped in this regard, she said in her feedback, "It was helpful to have to set time aside and really reflect on why I was interested in health research. As someone who is only beginning to enter into the job market, it's nice to have a better sense of myself and the type of work I like to do." For the second mentee whose mentorship spanned two academic years, she commented, "my goal is not so much understanding 'why I am conducting the research I am doing', but more so, I would like a job that keeps my 'hands dirty/working the bench' but also gives me a sense of purpose, requires me to be creative and can provide me a work-life balance." That they joined with a specific problem differed from the previous years that mentees had been part of the HeNReG from Ten Thousand Coffees, demonstrating that this form of online mentorship was able to attract mentees who had awareness of what problem they wanted solved with the mentorship. There is no published research on the types of mentees attracted to the Ten Thousand Coffees mentorship program, with only one peer-reviewed publication that mentions the program [105].

There was one mentee in the 2022/23 academic year from the Mentorship Program associated with my graduate department who participated in the HeNReP. Similar to those mentees from Ten Thousand Coffees, she chose to participate in the process because she had a particular problem to solve and had the self-awareness to understand how the HeNReP might be helpful to her. In considering where she should go with her research, this mentee commented, "I think I have constantly changed research areas…, all research has primarily revolved around psychology related topic areas but I started from focusing on university students, then focused on subfertility, then emotion regulation and now my research is more focused on immigrants and learning difficulties related experiences and parental involvement. I think I changed my research areas more or less to meet the expectations of the research context." However, a mentee from this Mentorship Program during the following academic year lacked this self-awareness and, after joining the HeNReP, spent her short time participating by sending me apologies for not responding to the writing prompt of the process.

Several other researchers joined the HeNReP with no connection to an organized mentorship program. These were professionals working in their fields, looking to solve particular problems related to their jobs. One was a physician from 2022/23. Her goal was to improve her self-awareness in assessing goals when she joined a research project. Regarding the role of the HeNReP, she stated, "Reflective writing project has taught me self-awareness and the improvement I made in research over the years." Another from that year was an ordained minister conducting research in theological education. The problem she encountered was a lack of opportunity for self-reflection. In this regard, she considered the structured process of the HeNReP helpful, "I appreciated the opportunity for self-reflection based on the nuances of the prompt. I felt that there was a real dialogue and that I learned something from the exchange of ideas and personal research practices shared and explained… This process allowed me to understand how the landscape of research and the scope of topics to be studied has changed as a result of the pandemic as well as to take stock of past experiences as a researcher and grow confidence for future projects or areas of exploration. I learned a lot about myself and my values around research topics, process, and design."

These two mentees completed the process. Four others did not. One was a dentist with a faculty appointment. It is unclear why the dentist did not complete the process, as he was perceptive regarding why he wanted to participate: "I am interested in understanding what it means to be an

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exceptional dentist as it relates to adaptability and communication using the theoretical framework of adaptive expertise. I am also interested in health system innovation in the dental domain as it relates to optimizing administrative processes, in a way that promotes better care and access, using program evaluation as a framework." Although the reason the dentist left the program is unknown, an engineering educator solved his problem independently and subsequently founded an international program to bring water to African countries lacking safe access to it. Another professional who participated in the HeNReP was a physician who explained this reason for having an interest in joining the HeNReP: "I previously assumed and kept these two research environments separate, however over the last decade, the inseparability and interdependence of the arts and health have become one of the main foci of my research." This mentee left the program because she identified a way to merge her two research interests. This result differed from an emotive therapist who joined the HeNReP because of her continued confusion regarding where her research should take her. Living in a country where she was personally affected by war (the HeNReP is an internationally available program), she was unable to complete the process. All of these mentees were from the 2023/24 academic year.

Beginning in the 2024/25 academic year, I no longer advertised the HeNReP. Nevertheless, I had one mentee who asked for a HeNReP on four separate occasions since then. She is a social worker affected by adult ADHD. She uses the process to help her bring clarity to her thought processes. In her words, "Structure, nudging/shifting supporting me on moving forward helps me pace myself regarding how much time I spend on a question is helpful… Allowed me to spend time exploring my research related to health, to reflect and think about older ideas in new ways." Research specific to mentoring professionals online during the pandemic is one publication regarding physicians [70]. The advice offered is: (1) address emotions, (2) adjust priorities, (3) change formats, (4) acknowledge technology fatigue, (5) recognize inequalities, and (6) remember to demonstrate active engagement. There was a following of this advice in the evolution of the HeNReG to the HeNReP in response to the pandemic.

4. Discussion

There are two major claims of this article regarding mentorship: (1) forms of mentorship have evolved from an idea to a culture of mentorship, and (2) there is a difference between protégés and mentees. An examination of both claims is in the following discussion.

4.1. Idea to Culture

According to a 1965 publication, "idea" was formally defined in the 17th century as representing an immediate object of thought or perception by an individual [106]. In this regard, "mentorship" became a fathomable idea when a mentor and mentee considered their relationship. Regardless of the type of relationship, it was perceived as a mentorship by those considering it. In 1871, culture was defined as encompassing social practices (rituals, customs, institutions, and norms), knowledge systems (beliefs, arts, laws), and individual behaviors (capabilities, attitudes, and habits) of those associated with these societies [107]. As such, the primary quality that differentiates mentorship as a culture is that it becomes something more than just an understanding by individuals. It becomes a socially complex and well-defined arrangement of individuals. In other words, apart from the mentee and the mentor, mentorship as a culture takes on a life of its own.

The arrangement of some of the fourteen different types of mentorship in which I have participated as a mentor since 1987 was individual associations between a mentee and a mentor. Others have been the product of an organized mentorship program. Evaluating these different types of mentorships together, those in which both the mentee and the mentor considered the mentorship a success, resulted from the instigator of the association being the mentee regarding a problem they had that they considered I would be able to help solve, apart from any pre-designed program. The first two mentorships are the best example of this. The mentees approached me with solvable problems they were unable to resolve on their own, and considered that I could facilitate their

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solution, which I was able to do. In contrast, the least successful were those mentorships arranged through an organized program, and the mentee lacked any understanding of what they might obtain from the mentorship. In these cases, I attempted to make contact with mentees who actively avoided responding because they were unsure what they wanted from the mentorship.

The aim of a mentorship must be a match between a mentee who has the self-awareness to recognize what they seek from a mentorship and the knowledge to understand that the mentorship ends with the solution to problems. In this regard, organized cultures of mentorship to be successful should offer opportunities for mentees to select their own mentors [108] and for mentors to make the knowledge they are willing to provide evident [109]. With the formation of these types of matches, not only are the mentees' questions answered, but the recognition most appreciated by the mentors is also provided, rather than extraneous rewards unrelated to the mentorship [110]. The fact of a mentorship culture alone is unable to produce the productive results of the mentor/mentee relationship [111].

4.2. Protégés and Mentees

Although the use of the term "mentee" has become more common, "protégé" is associated with a mentor in many recent publications on mentorship, rather than "mentee". Some examples are [73,112–114]. Yet, it is because the use of these terms remains interchangeable that misunderstandings can arise between mentors and mentees. In contrast to the mentee who intends to solve a particular problem [115], the protégé is a student or a younger colleague engaging a mentor for psychosocial and career-related support [116,117].

Comparing the fourteen types of mentorships I have experienced over the years, it is likely that the basis of problems I have encountered is the evolution of mentorship from an idea to a culture lacking a focus on differentiating mentee and protégé as two distinct terms. The most taxing mentorship I experienced was with the woman I had known since birth, whom I volunteered to mentor after she experienced a health crisis that left her unable to work. Although I had hoped to get her to a state of being able to work, as she did not come to me with a problem and instead used our interactions for psychosocial support, I was unsatisfied with our mentorship. Similarly, some students who signed up for the undergraduate college Career Mentorship Program, Ten Thousand Coffees, or those who participated in the mentorship program of my graduate department, wanted to be associated with these programs only for career-related support. As this was not my offering, many of these mentees, hoping to be protégés, left the programs because I was unable to provide this type of career navigation.

Reflecting on my fourteen types of mentorships, had I (for individual mentorships) or the matching programs (for organized mentorships) made the distinction between being "mentee" and "protégé" clear, all the matches might have been successful. The reason is that those people who were looking to be protégés regarding my mentorship would have been recognized from the beginning as a poor match with my interest in them as mentees.

4.3. Limitations

The types of bias that researchers must mitigate in publishing data are several. An individual researcher, such as this author, must demonstrate extra concern to avoid these biases, as there is no research team to counteract them. An inability to overcome any of them represents the limitations of an article. The range of biases relevant to this particular study is (1) selection bias where participant self-selection lacks population representation, (2) researcher bias where the researcher influences the participant responses, (3) information bias when the data are incorrectly recorded, either from inaccurate participant memory or researcher error, (4) confirmation bias where the focus is on evidence that supports a theory, ignoring contradictory data (5) reporting bias when there is a reporting of positive results while ignoring negative ones, and (6) procedural bias where data are analyzed to produce a specific outcome.

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Consideration of the meaning of selection bias in social science research was relatively obvious initially [118]. It was recognized as controversial recently, as the distinctions between different types of this bias remain unclear [119]. Regarding this research study, the work includes only those participants in mentorships who continued with the match until the mentorship culmination. As such, I have not reported on how many potential mentees did not, for example, decide to respond to the initial introduction to me in Ten Thousand Coffees. Why they did not choose to respond is unknown. Therefore, including all potential mentees in this assessment, the results may have differed.

Researcher bias is particularly evident when the research has a strong affinity towards the population being investigated [120]. However, recent research has recognized that the problem with researcher bias concerns their potential self-interest regarding their position or role [121]. In comparing the fourteen different types of mentoring experiences over 39 years, I have had varying positions, from being a representative of several institutions, to being a support for those for whom I feel responsible, to being a founder of various programs, to being a participant in three mentorship programs designed by different organizations. The situations that included self-interest were (1) when I acted as a responsible support person, and (2) as a founder of programs—I did have a personal stake in the success of these mentorships. Yet, when mentoring as a representative of several institutions, my superiors were unaware of the mentorships I took on. These mentorships were mentioned only in my CV and the correspondence between my mentees and me. Regarding my involvement in the three institutionally organized mentorship programs, I have received more acclaim for my participation than necessary. In no case did I use the recognition for personal advancement.

The possibility of information bias would be most likely when I was a representative of different institutions, as these initial mentorships occurred before the commercial use of the World Wide Web for email communication in 1995 [122]. For the mentorships preceding then, I must rely on my memory of the interactions and the subsequent emails over the years, keeping in contact with the people whom I mentored. Nevertheless, since there are no documents confirming what happened in the mentorships during this period, this is a limitation. Distortion of reality is a problem arising from information bias—one most often evident in questionnaire design [123]. It is controllable with the use of a standardized questionnaire design [124]. Recognizing the possibility of this type of bias when I first created the feedback forms completed by members of the HeNReG (also used later for the HeNReP), these forms were standardized based on those used by other offerings associated with the Health Arts and Humanities Program of the Department of Psychiatry [125].

The value of presenting the results of fourteen different types of mentorships in which I engaged for over 39 years is that the various kinds of confirmation bias initially identified in 1995 are reduced [126]. Yet, confirmation bias may have been a feature of the HeNReG as a group activity, as the group enthusiasm that was featured when the HeNReG was in person, and the reduction in peer participation once the group was online, may reflect a type of confirmation bias. A 2024 publication on confirmation bias in groups has noted that "confirmation bias benefits group learning across a wide range of resource-scarcity conditions" [127]. Although it is possible that the feedback received from the HeNReG in mentoring participants reflected confirmation bias, this bias may have influenced the success in reducing burnout in health researchers.

Reporting bias decreases the value of a research study, and was, in 2010, an under-reported problem [128]. In recent research, it remains evident when only favorable results are reported [129]. In my own history of mentorships, I have endeavored to provide a transparent account of not only their successes but also their failures. Some of these failures I have attributed to organizational decisions apart from my influence. However, others primarily resulted from my own failure to understand the role of a mentorship as distinct from psychosocial therapy—most notably the concern I showed in initiating a mentorship (described in Section 3.6.). Similarly, although I believe that the change to the Ten Thousand Coffee mentorship program has generally reduced the success in

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matching mentors and mentees, I acknowledge (in Section 3.14.) that this program remained capable of attracting mentees who can benefit from a mentorship program.

Procedural bias was recognized initially as a primary concern in health research with bioethical implications [130]. Its control can be from sufficient and standardized approaches to data accumulation and storage [131]. Since the accumulation and storage of data for this study were in various ways, a lack of standardization is a limitation of this work. Particularly since one researcher accomplished all aspects. Nevertheless, the 39-year history of my involvement with fourteen disparate mentorships was not a research study. Until writing this paper, these mentorships had no connection other than all being part of my history. As such, although this work does have procedural bias, it does not arise from intended manipulation of the data. Instead, it is a result of the lack of a research study guiding the original gathering and storage of the data.

4.4. Future Research Directions

Future research comparing "mentor", "mentee", and "mentorship" should be a dedicated research endeavor—preferably one conducted by a research team—to reduce the possibility of procedural and researcher bias. To mitigate information bias, data should be stored in an open research platform, such as Zenodo or OSF [132], as each provides a timestamp, a registry, and preservation [133].

Additionally, different types of mentorships require systematic comparison for their success. The various mentorship matching programs, where the institution decides on the match, need comparison. Then compare them with programs where the mentees select their mentors. Also in need of comparison are instances where mentors select mentees versus mentees initiating the mentorship. The aim here would be to determine the level of success for each.

I have mentored men, women, teenagers, and children over the 39 years of my participation. I have had mentorships with people from various countries, both online and in person, with those who are younger than me and older. However, there is no systematic demographic comparison of these mentees. Future research on mentorship should collect demographic information and also compare those who consider themselves mentees with those who join programs as protégés.

5. Conclusions

Revealed by this historical chrononarratological study of the fourteen types of mentorships in which I have engaged over 39 years is that the most successful mentorships are those in which the mentee came to the mentorship process with self-awareness regarding a particular solvable problem they had, which they considered I might help in finding the answer. Those mentees who lacked such self-awareness, a solvable problem, or the understanding that I might be able to help them with the solution considered the mentorship deficient. In most cases, this result was a lack of differentiation between "mentee" and "protégé". In other words, they joined the mentorship for career or psychosocial support rather than to solve a problem. It was when they sought me for support as a protégé(e) that the mentorship floundered. When a mentee, rather than a protégé(e), initiates a mentorship program, the results demonstrate that their gender, age, nationality, race, family relationship, and communication method are irrelevant to the success of the mentorship. In contrast, when the matching of mentees to mentors is through an organized program, these variables do matter to the success of the mentorship. This information is relevant and potentially valuable for developing the mentorship culture of such programs.

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Data Availability Statement: The bases of the data for this study are (1) private emails to and from mentorship programs and the author, (2) private emails between the author and mentees, (3) online feedback forms from the HeNReG and HeNReP, (4) online responses by mentees in the HeNReG and HeNReP private Facebook

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1166.v1

groups, and (5) published articles by the author. The articles are in the reference list and are publicly available. Following anonymization, emails, feedback forms, and entries in the private Facebook groups are available for scrutiny by researchers upon request.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

HeNReG	Health Narrative Research Group
HeNReP	Health Narrative Research Process

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