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# Revealing darkness through light

## Communicatively managing the dark side of mentoring relationships in organisations

**Kristen Carr and Erica P. Heiden**

*ABSTRACT: Existing research has indicated that mentoring in organisations serves a variety of beneficial functions, including socialising new employees, increasing employee self-esteem and competence, and teaching them how to navigate organisational politics. Although the benefits of mentoring are clear and well documented, there is a potential 'dark side' to mentoring that has the potential to result in role confusion, interpersonal conflict, the loss of individual power, and diluted organisational culture. It is our purpose in this paper to reconceptualise the role of communication in mentoring as a way to illuminate this dark side of mentoring within organisations.*

### Introduction

According to Greek mythology, when Odysseus left his home to fight the Trojans, he asked a close friend to oversee his household and his son's education.

*Three thousand years later, when we speak of the process by which a more experienced member of an organization counsels a younger colleague on the unwritten facts of life, Odysseus' friend, Mentor, has been immortalized by the attachment of his name to this widespread form of knowledge-sharing'. (Wilson & Elman, 1990, p.88)*

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In contemporary times, mentoring is thought of as a notably positive, functionally beneficial relationship. Drawing from Ragins and Scandura's (1999) frequently cited definition, a mentor is defined as 'an influential individual in your work environment who has advanced experience and knowledge and who is committed to providing upward mobility and support to your career' (p. 496). Mentors must be willing to invest time, interest, and support in an individual over an extended period (McDowall-Long, 2004) and the mechanism through which this support and knowledge are provided is inherently based in communication. Indeed, Raabe and Beehr (2003) note the communicative nature of mentoring relationships when they describe mentoring interactions as 'chains of reactions and counter-reactions, as well as thoughts, feelings, intentions and plans of each of the participants' (p. 272). Yet, mentorships are unique because they do not assume that the relationship is an affiliation between equals (Kalbfleisch, 1997). More strikingly, Hunt and Michael (1983) assert that, 'Compared to other dyadic relationships, the mentor-protégé dyad appears to be the most intense or emotionally charged, hierarchical, parental, exclusionary, and elitist' (p. 476). Thus, when constrained by organisational boundaries, the interpersonal nature of these relationships can make them extremely complex.

By and large, there is an assumed positive impact of mentoring, which has led to an increase in the number of formal mentoring programs among organisations (Raabe & Beehr, 2003). Allen and Eby (2003) argue that mentoring is becoming increasingly relevant, given that rapidly changing organisational structures and disappearing career boundaries require fast-paced learning. As a result of its increasing popularity, Allen, Eby, Lentz, Lima, & Poteet (2004) suggest that researchers provide organisation leaders and mentoring practitioners with concrete information on the benefits of mentoring. Yet, much of the existing research on these benefits has been conducted within specific organisational settings (e.g., hospitals or universities) or on specific types of mentoring relationships (e.g., formal or informal) but has been generalised to *all* mentorships.

To be clear, we recognise and support the notion that mentoring can be beneficial and functional to protégés, mentors, and organisations alike. At the same time, we caution against conceptualising mentoring as a panacea for all organisational ills. Thus, a primary purpose of this paper is to provide a more balanced perspective by considering the social construction of the mentor-protégé relationship as both inherently interpersonal and organisationally bound. Concurrently,

because the historical approach is positively biased, we argue that there is enormous benefit to considering the 'dark side' of mentoring. Indeed, one cannot fully understand the potential benefits of mentoring without also examining its risks. This perspective, in turn, positions communication at the forefront of understanding the dark side of organisational behaviour.

## **The bright side of mentoring**

Scholars in the fields of management, human resources, psychology, and to some extent, communication, have frequently discussed the benefits of mentoring (e.g., Allen & Eby, 2003; Allen et al., 2004; Egan, 1996; Kram, 1985; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Raabe & Beehr, 2003; Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). Mentoring is often portrayed as a risk-free relationship (Taherian & Shekarchian, 2008) in which protégés thrive under the wisdom and guidance of their mentor. Although we question the accuracy of the term 'risk free', we recognise that mentoring relationships are often intended to allow a protégé to develop in a less judgmental context than other organisationally bound relationships. Nevertheless, the use of this term exemplifies the positive overtone that often characterises mentoring research.

In addition to touting the benefits of mentoring for protégés, researchers have also examined how mentors benefit from mentoring relationships. Indeed, mentors may enjoy increased visibility (Ragins & Scandura, 1999) and leadership within the organisation (Wright & Wright, 1987) and may gain a sense of generativity and self-satisfaction from seeing protégés succeed. In fact, Ragins and Scandura (1999) argue that the feeling of satisfaction from aiding the development of a younger adult is the *primary* benefit mentors receive from mentoring relationships. In addition to the benefits of mentorships for mentors and protégés, Wilson and Elman (1990) argue that the benefits organisations receive from these relationships are positively related to their long-term health as social systems. Some of the most noted organisational benefits of mentoring include decreased employee turnover (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Dawson & Watson, 2007; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), increased productivity (Bullis & Bach, 1989), continuation of organisational culture (McDowall-Long, 2004), and the development of managerial and senior-level talent (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Joiner, Bartram, & Garreffa, 2004).

## **The dark side of mentoring**

Although there are many potential benefits of mentoring for protégés,

mentors, and the overall organisation, it is misleading and unrealistic to consider mentoring as an exclusively 'bright' phenomenon. Indeed, the body of research on mentoring has been criticised as being positively skewed, concentrating predominantly on the benefits of mentoring while generally ignoring potential costs and drawbacks (McDowall-Long, 2004; Merriam, 1983; Scandura, 1998). A meta-analysis of mentoring articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 1999 and 2002 revealed that only one article mentioned potentially negative outcomes or consequences from mentoring relationships (McDowall-Long, 2004). Thus, mentoring is frequently touted as beneficial, yet the literature lacks precise estimates of the effect sizes associated with the benefits of mentoring (Allen et al., 2004), suggesting a significantly overlooked dark side to the mentoring relationship for the mentor, the protégé, and the organisation.

In one of the few attempts to examine the dark side of mentoring, McClelland (2009) characterises mentor-on mentee-aggression (MOMA) as not only commonplace, but also an 'expectable feature' of mentoring relationships (p. 61). McClelland introduces three alternative perspectives on MOMA that position this particular form of aggression as ethological (i.e., as a form of social learning), evolutionary (i.e., by testing mentor-protégé bonds), and psychodynamic (i.e., as a 'natural' form of everyday narcissism). Although this assertion is both intriguing and insightful, McClelland presents aggression as an inherently dark phenomenon, as evidenced by his examples and overall conclusions. We agree that aggression has the potential to be detrimental, but also point to Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) dark side typology which challenged us to think of traditionally dark characteristics as potentially functional and/or bright. In other words, just as we must consider aggression as a possible dark side of mentoring, we must also consider that there is a bright side to this darkness. Might mentor-on-mentee-aggression be functionally bright? To expand this discussion and move away from this dichotomous perspective, we propose positioning the dark side of mentoring as emergent through communication between mentors and protégés.

Given the centrality of communication to organisations in general, and mentoring relationships specifically (Raabe & Behr, 2003), examining how communication supports or hinders mentoring relationships at both the dyadic and organisational level may illuminate the potential dark side of mentoring. Perhaps more importantly, highlighting the idea that mentoring, like most other interpersonal relationships, has the potential to be beneficial *and* harmful is likely to provide

important insight into the most effective ways to negotiate the challenges associated with mentorships. To provide a context for understanding the various ways in which mentoring relationships can become dysfunctional, Scandura (1998) characterises mentorships in organisations as similar to other close interpersonal relationships, though existing within a workplace environment. Given that mentoring relationships are organisationally bound yet inherently interpersonal, incorporating Cupach and Spitzberg's (1994; 2004) heuristic metaphor of the dark side of communication is particularly useful.

Over the last decade, the conceptual framework of the dark side of personal relationships has grown in both scope and popularity. Perhaps as a result, Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) expand their conceptual typology for understanding the complexities associated with the dark side. Specifically, the dark side exists along two continuous dimensions: first, that which ranges from 'normatively and morally appropriate' to 'normatively and morally inappropriate,' and second, that which is 'functionally productive versus functionally destructive' (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007, p. 5). From these dimensions, a four-category typology emerges, three of which are useful in understanding the boundaries of dark behaviour. That is, the dark side metaphor encompasses that which is presumptively or normatively and functionally destructive (entitled 'evil incarnate'), that which is presumptively or normatively productive and functionally destructive (entitled 'what once was bright is now dark'), and that which is presumptively or normatively destructive and functionally productive (entitled 'what once was dark is now bright') (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007, p. 5). Importantly, this metaphor introduces a degree of doubt and ambiguity in positioning *any* communicative behaviour as inherently bright or dark. Thus, our overarching purpose in the sections that follow is to explore how mentoring, while presumptively and normatively productive, may also be functionally destructive. In other words, we consider the ways in which mentorships might be considered as 'once bright, but may also be dark'.

Drawing from this typology of the dark side of close relationships, Scandura (1998) introduced a similar 2 x 2 structure unique to mentorships. This typology indicated four possible categories in which mentorships could fall, depending on whether the individuals' intent is positive or negative, and also if the relational process is psychosocial or vocational (Scandura, 1998). The resulting four categories were negative relations (psychosocial with bad intent), difficulty (psychosocial with good intent), sabotage (vocational with bad intent), and spoiling

(vocational with good intent). Thus, as a backdrop to understanding the dark side, each of these dysfunctional aspects of mentorship will be discussed in turn.

According to Scandura's typology, *negative relations* between mentor and protégé occur when the relationship is characterised by bad intent towards a psychosocial aspect that is inherent in the relationship. A likely manifestation of this type of dysfunction is mentor bullying, often fuelled by emphasising the power differential between a mentor and protégé. These situations are rarely functional for protégés regardless of their response, as struggling against a more powerful mentor can be professionally damaging, and succumbing to an exploitive relationship allows mentors to maintain control. Mentoring relationships falling within this category are, at least conceptually, the most detrimental because the negative intent is fundamental to the relationship itself.

Although also characterised by bad intent, *sabotage* differs from negative relations in that the behaviour is contained within the vocational aspect of the relationship (Scandura, 1998). Unlike negative relations, either mentor or protégé can initiate sabotage, and its origin is rooted in organisational life. For example, protégés may harbour feelings of resentment if they are not recommended for a promotion, or mentors might punish protégés if they fail to live up to their expectations.

Importantly, not all dysfunctional mentoring relationships are characterised by bad intentions. Drawing from Duck's (1994) conceptualisation of *difficulty*, a combination of good intentions coupled with psychosocial problems can also create issues in mentoring relationships. For example, mentors may offer personal opinions under the guise of professional advice, making it difficult for protégés to make their own decisions as a result of the inherent power differential in the relationships. These types of situations are often most damaging to the protégé, as it is often difficult to distinguish guidance and suggestions from professional requirements.

Finally, a fourth category of dysfunction in mentoring exists when there is good intent, but problems arise related to the vocational aspect of the relationship. Often related to perceptions of organisational fairness, *spoiling* occurs when job-related concerns taint an otherwise amicable interpersonal relationship. For example, protégés may feel that they are not receiving proper credit for their ideas within the organisation and may even bypass their mentors and present their

ideas to other organisational members. In this case, mentors are likely to feel betrayed and disappointed, which can introduce bad intent into the relationship.

Framed by these two broader dark typologies, there is a variety of specific issues that have been identified as potentially damaging within mentoring relationships. Interestingly, the majority of studies that mention the potential dark side of mentoring seem to derive from a desire to understand its benefits. Many positive effects of mentoring have been thought to affect male and female protégés equally (Horvath, Wasko, & Bradley, 2008), but examining these relationships from a dark side perspective reveals that this is often not the case. Consequently, one concept useful in understanding how mentoring relationships turn from bright to dark is 'difference'. Allen (2011) argues that difference is best understood by considering characteristics such as race, gender, social class, and age, in addition to how individuals understand themselves and others on a continuum from similarity to dissimilarity. When examining the potential dark side of mentoring relationships, there is a multitude of 'difference' themes that have the potential to inform our understanding of mentorships. Two of the most prominent themes associated with mentoring, power and gender, will be addressed below.

### **The dark side of power difference**

There is often a significant power differential between protégés and their mentors, which can be used to benefit either member of the dyad. For example, mentors can wield their power to advance their protégé's career and they may be perceived as a successful leader if their protégés are successful. Kalbfleisch (2002) argues that power acts as an undercurrent to all communication in organisational mentoring relationships. Power can do this on both interpersonal and organisational levels and shifts on either level can make mentoring relationships dysfunctional. On an interpersonal level, a protégé often shares personal information with their mentor over the course of their relationship. In interpersonal communication, it is often recognised that when an individual self-discloses to another person, the self-disclosing individual grants the recipient of the personal information increased power in order to increase the intimacy of the relationship. Taherian and Shekarchian (2008) note that this self-disclosure can create a potential confidentiality breach if a mentor leaks sensitive information to individuals in management positions of the organisation, potentially emasculating the power of the protégé.



On an organisational level, because a mentor is often of a higher status than their protégé, it is possible that a mentor may exploit the protégé to further his or her own career with little consideration of how the protégé should also benefit from the relationship (Wright & Wright, 1987). Indeed, a mentor could inadvertently hinder a protégé's potential career advancement by becoming too overprotective, perhaps by shielding the protégé from risks that may also be significant opportunities. Both of these examples, whether a mentor intentionally or unintentionally thwarts a protégé's career advancement, represent circumstances where the communication in a mentoring relationship turns from bright to dark, undermining the original, constructive purpose of the relationship.

Even when protégés successfully advance their career, presumably aided through functional communication with a mentor, their relationship could significantly change or even become dysfunctional. It is possible that, as protégés rise up the corporate ladder, they may surpass their mentor in the organisational hierarchy (Wilson & Elman, 1990), which may cause the mentor to feel threatened (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008). Even without the protégé formally surpassing the mentor in organisational status, it is possible that over time the mentor may lose power or influence within the organisation (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008), which can affect the dynamics of the mentoring relationship. Despite these clear challenges, there is a significant lack of guidance regarding how protégés and mentors can manage such changes in dynamics while preventing the communication and relationship from becoming dysfunctional.

### **The dark side of gender difference**

The concept of difference can also be applied in a gender analysis of two specific aspects of mentoring relationships. First, it has been noted that male and female protégés have dissimilar access to mentors and mentorships. Using the similarity attraction paradigm, researchers have found that mentors are drawn to protégés they perceive to be similar to themselves (Allen & Eby, 2003; Kalbfleisch, 2000), which may serve to reinforce the existing social hierarchies. Specifically, Raabe and Beehr (2003) suggest that this attraction may lead individuals in upper management positions to select protégés belonging to higher social classes stemming from a perception of having shared social skills and values with particular protégés. It is important that protégés and mentors are well matched (e.g., in terms of goals and communication styles) because mismatched pairings may hinder the success and

effectiveness of the relationship, or even cause it to fail, through clashes of priorities and miscommunication. Yet, this attraction to similarities potentially limits protégés' access to mentors who may benefit from them the most.

Several scholars have noted that protégés' tendencies to gravitate towards mentors with whom they closely identify can hinder female (and minority) employees' ability to find mentors and develop mentoring relationships (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kalbfleisch, 1997; Kalbfleisch, 2002; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Wilson & Elman, 1990; Wright & Wright, 1987). As a result, it often becomes more difficult for females to find mentors and to access the benefits of mentoring relationships than it is for their male colleagues (Taherian & Shekarchian, 2008). Even when female employees act as mentors, they are often younger, positioned in lower organisational ranks, command less status, and have less power than male mentors, indicating that there can be gender differences in mentoring contexts for both protégés and mentors (McDowall-Long, 2004). Thus, mentoring relationships collectively function as a site where the difference between male and female colleagues is evident and reinforced.

When organisational mentoring relationships are cross-gendered, (e.g., female protégés paired with male mentors), they may be fraught with sexual innuendo (Allen & Eby, 2003). In some cases, mentoring in cross-gender relationships may be less effective than same-gender relationships because of the potential for damaging gossip, sexual attraction, and marital disruption (Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). Although many of these cross-gender mentorships are benign, women may be less likely to initiate mentoring relationships because others in the organisation may view the relationship as sexual (Turban & Dougherty, 1994) and they may require a significant amount of relational maintenance to maintain professionalism (Tepper, 1995). Although understanding gender imbalances in mentoring is useful and beneficial, the conclusions from this body of research are often targeted toward either the mentor or protégé, and framed by organisations as a stepwise, prescriptive approach.

## **Discussion**

Although mentoring in organisations has enjoyed a rather bright and optimistic history, there is a dark side that must also be considered. Mentoring has the potential to provide significant benefits to individuals as well as the organisations for which they work, but

it should not be viewed as a panacea. To be most effective, the use of mentoring should be strategic, deliberate, and thoughtful; that is, organisations should be cognisant of how mentoring might be harmful to the mentor, the protégé, and the organisation as a whole. One way of achieving this goal is by reconceptualising mentoring relationships as inherently emergent through communication. Thus, instead of focusing on a specific individual within the dyad (either the mentor or the protégé) to understand the dark side of mentoring, it may be useful to examine the synergistic and communicative challenges associated with mentorships, by relocating the site of difficulty from the mentor or protégé to the mentorship process itself.

### ***The site of difficulty in mentoring relationships***

Interestingly, the vast majority of research on mentorships recognises the mentor-protégé relationship as primarily dyadic, yet not decisively interpersonal. Based on the challenges and dysfunctions discussed previously, it seems that mentorships have many of the same qualities associated with other close relationships. Consequently, we argue that using a communicative perspective can help manage the challenges associated with mentor-protégé relationships by reconceptualising the cause and location of dysfunction.

An increasingly common approach that links research in organisational communication with the dark side of relationships involves locating the site or source of difficulty (Foley, 2006; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Seemingly disparate lines of research position communication as the 'modality' through which organisations (Giddens, 1984), including their dark side emerge. In other words, the role of communication is expanded beyond the mere transmission of information to include the social co-construction of reality. Communication between individuals becomes mutually symbiotic and jointly constructed, and thus no one person can accept full responsibility for any outcome (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Taken in the context of organisational dark side behaviour, focusing on communication as a potential site of difficulty in mentorships requires a conceptual shift in the way we conceive and manage these situations. Furthermore, because mentorships are both interpersonally and organisationally bound, this perspective is informed by understanding that within a mentorship situation there are multiple sites of difficulty, all of which are inherently communicative and equally able to have a dark side.

According to Foley (2006), there are four possible sites in which difficulty is commonly situated in the context of intimate partner

violence: in the abused partner, in the abusive partner, in relational interaction, or in societal discourses. As one can imagine, locating the source of dark or dysfunctional relationships is not precise, especially when considering that these sites are rarely mutually exclusive. Indeed, assigning blame in most dark relationships is often counterproductive because it necessarily limits agency of the other individual. Arguably, the same holds true for understanding the dark side of mentoring relationships. By examining mentorships solely from the perspective of the mentor or the protégé, we locate the source of difficulty as existing solely within that individual. This truncates the ability of either the mentor or the protégé (depending on the circumstances) to enact change on their behalf. For example, a significant amount of research indicates a negative relationship between supervisors' use of verbal aggressiveness and employee satisfaction (Gorden & Infante, 1987; Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988; Infante & Gorden, 1985, 1987, 1991; Madlock & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2010). Consequently, it seems reasonable to suggest that protégés with verbally aggressive mentors will be less satisfied with their relationship than those in mentorships free from verbal aggression. Although this may be true, this interpretation simplifies a relationally *communicative* behaviour (i.e., verbal aggressiveness) as located within one individual: the supervisor or mentor. Thus, protégés with verbally aggressive mentors are left with little agency to enact change in their relationship. In other words, they are positioned as 'victims' of this dark side of mentoring. To be clear, we see immense value in research investigating the relationship between these kinds of communicative behaviour and relational outcomes, but we caution against an extrapolation of the results that places blame or responsibility *solely* on one party.

As introduced above, a more functional and beneficial way to conceptualise the dark side of mentoring in organisations is to re-centre the location of difficulty to the communicative interaction itself. To do so necessitates a conceptual shift from blaming the mentor or protégé for the difficulties associated with mentorships toward a realisation that these challenges may emerge from the communication between them. Like many close relationships, mentorships can (and do) change over time in a variety of ways. In some cases, obligatory formal mentoring can evolve into informal and more effective mentorships, suggesting that high-quality mentoring can emerge regardless of the origin of the relationship (Allen & Eby, 2003). However, mentoring can also become increasingly 'dissatisfying and destructive' as individual and organisational demands change (Kram, 1985, p. 10). Thus, it seems likely that the challenges and dysfunction in dark mentorships *emerge*

*through interaction*, rather than simply existing as a consequence of individual behaviour. However, in order to successfully relocate the site of difficulty in mentoring relationships in this way, it may be necessary to first change the societal discourses associated with them. Specifically, organisations should consider the potential dark side of mentorships as an *inherent* and *emergent* part of mentoring, and work to manage the expectations of both mentors and protégés accordingly. Furthermore, framing mentorships as both relational and communicative may aid in balancing the power differential between mentors and protégés that often becomes problematic by simultaneously creating a space for the ‘dark,’ while also encouraging the ‘bright.’

A natural and important extension of examining mentorships through a dark side lens includes the realisation that not all dark phenomena are inherently negative. Indeed, a theme that connects dark-side research focuses on the idea that these phenomena may be functionally ambivalent (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2010) and may even have positive outcomes. Importantly, this perspective does not minimise the negativity present in the initial dark event, but rather reframes it in a way that highlights its potentially motivating or beneficial consequences. Moving forward into this new wave of inquiry focused on the dark side of organisations, it is important not to equate ‘dark’ and ‘bright’ with ‘negative’ and ‘positive.’ In other words, even dark aspects of mentoring (e.g., mentor-on-mentee-aggression, see McLelland, 2009) have the potential to serve a beneficial purpose within the organisation, and perhaps even within the mentorship itself.

### ***Organisational applications***

Our analysis of the role of communication in the dark side of mentoring has illuminated a number of implications relevant to how mentoring relationships should be approached in organisations. First, although the dark side of mentoring is often understated or overlooked, we recognise such relationships have the potential to be both bright and dark. As one way to potentially manage the dark side of mentoring, we support the idea that protégés form mentorships with multiple mentors. Interacting with multiple colleagues may allow individuals to draw from varied perspectives. This may be especially important in challenging or dysfunctional mentorships, as examining the communication in positive mentorships may provide a functional model against which to enact change. Multiple mentorships may also help mentors and protégés navigate shifts in power and status as protégés move up in their organisations and mentors potentially move down. By not relying so heavily on just one mentoring relationship,

individuals and organisations may weather the ripple effects of shifts in power more evenly.

Second, we discussed the power that protégés relinquish to mentors in self-disclosing to mentors—a necessary step to foster the intimacy needed in a mentoring relationship. Existing literature (e.g., Taherian and Shekarchian, 2008), suggests that protégés must disclose personal information at a level disproportionate to mentors in order to receive the personal guidance that they seek in navigating their professional lives. Duck (1994) suggests that one site where mentoring relationships can turn from bright to dark is where protégés cannot distinguish this personal guidance from professional suggestions, so having access to multiple perspectives could help protégés and mentors avoid this pitfall. We believe that using communication to negotiate this imbalance can result in a more even distribution of power by encouraging mentors to admit their own challenges and mistakes to their protégés.

Finally, past literature has discussed how mentor relationships are strongly influenced by gender, a factor we have identified that may turn mentorships from bright to dark. It is important for both mentors and protégés to be aware of how gender affects their relationships. For example, female protégés should be aware that, while they may sense more similarity with female mentors, female mentors may not have the same power or status as a male mentor in their organisation. That said, it is also necessary for mentors and protégés to be aware that cross-gender mentorships often require additional relational maintenance to that required in same-gender mentorships. We are not advocating that same-gender or cross-gender mentorships are more beneficial than the other, but that they both have their benefits and drawbacks of which mentors and protégés should be cognisant.

## **Conclusion**

Applied research in communication and related disciplines is often dedicated to providing suggestions and ‘best practices’ for managing interpersonal issues such as verbal aggressiveness (Madlock & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2010), conflict (Taherian & Shekarchian, 2008), and role confusion (Alliott, 1996). Indeed, these are issues that frequently surface in mentoring relationships as well. The translation of this kind of research into organisational practice has often been prescriptive and one-sided, resulting in extensive and mutually exclusive ‘how to’ lists for mentors, protégés, and organisations. Examining mentorships from a dark-side perspective necessarily blurs the boundaries between the

benefits and potential issues for mentors, protégés, and organisations discussed above. Rather than considering each of these elements in isolation, it suggests that the relationship between mentors and protégés is both inherently communicative and organisationally bound. Therefore, to better understand the evolution of mentoring relationships, future researchers should examine the ways in which communication within these relationships supports and hinders this process. Because interpersonal communication is the mechanism through which the process of mentoring is enacted, relocating the source of darkness within mentoring relationships to the communication created at the interface between mentors, protégés, and organisations necessitates that all three work in conjunction to successfully manage the relationship.

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