# Mentoring As Reframing: A Useful Conceptualisation of Dyadic Multidisciplinary Mentoring in Academia

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## ABSTRACT

Mentoring relationships between academics have been conceptualised in a variety of ways, drawing on concepts such as developmental networks, complex adaptive systems and ecology. However, reflecting on our experience as a mentoring dyad in a university context, we considered that existing models of mentoring fail to capture what was a central element of our mentoring conversations: the reframing of challenges. Reframing is a well-established therapeutic technique in social work that aims to help people change their perceptions from a problem to solution focus. By analysing three areas where reframing was powerful in our discussions, we argue that it represents a useful way of conceptualising the work of mentoring across academic fields. We suggest that mentoring-as-reframing can be particularly valuable for early- and mid-career academics, as a stimulus to both recognise and engage critically with implicit organisational priorities, and to explore alternative solutions to what may be seen as intractable problems.

**Keywords:** *Mentoring; Reframing; Higher education; Leadership; Career development*

## INTRODUCTION

Existing literature points to the range of ways in which mentoring has been conceptualised, including within the university context. In a recent review, Jones and Brown (2011) described the evolution of mentoring models from top-down encounters to reciprocal relationships of mutual benefit. Further diverse and innovative ways of thinking about academic mentoring relationships have been proposed, drawing on concepts such as developmental networks (Higgins & Kram, 2001), complex adaptive systems (Jones & Brown, 2011), ecology (Sambunjak, 2015) and flexibility (Ewing et al., 2008).

In this paper, we argue that the idea of *reframing* is a helpful addition to conceptual discussions of multidisciplinary mentoring in academia. Reframing is a well-established social work practice technique that aims to help people change their perceptions from problems to solutions (Connolly & Harms, 2015; Tyrrell, 2014). People perceive and interpret issues through a particular lens, and if the lens is constraining they can get stuck in thinking processes that also restrict opportunities to problem solve and move forward. Fundamentally, strengths-based and solution-focused reframing seeks to shift thinking from the impossible to the possible. Looking back on our experience as a mentoring dyad in a university context, reframing the challenges of an academic career was a central element of the work we did together. Reframing enabled us to identify ways forward through difficult (but common) experiences encountered by early- and mid-career academics, and provided a context for seeing things differently in solution-focused ways.

To demonstrate the usefulness of conceptualising mentoring as reframing, we briefly outline the concept of reframing, and then describe three of the reframing discussions that we had during our mentoring year together. The challenges represent systemic concerns for early- and mid-career academics (Karpiak, 1996; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2015). In our view, conceptualising mentoring as reframing and exploring these areas through a reframing lens offers a promising approach to academic mentoring conversations.

### The concept of reframing

The concept of reframing has been used in the context of many different topics. Searching the literature on reframing suggests that everything from convenience food to intensive care outcomes can be reframed (Jackson & Viehoff, 2016; Yagiela, Harper, & Meert, 2018). The concept been adapted and applied in a wide range of disciplines including education (e.g., Ellis, 2018) and leadership (e.g., Bolman & Gallos, 2011). In the original context of cognitive behaviour therapy, reframing "aims to change maladaptive, self-defeating, and distressing cognitions in a more positive perspective" (Karpetis, 2016, pp. 195–196). In the broader literature, definitions of reframing vary from the very straightforward – "exploring a situation from multiple perspectives" (Gallos, 1993) – to many more complex and discipline-specific understandings.

The understanding of reframing used in this paper, draws on a recent concept analysis of cognitive reframing (Robson & Troutman-Jordan, 2014). These scholars write that "[r]eframing has been defined as changing the conceptual viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced…Specifically, cognitive reframing involves changing the way people see things and trying to find alternative ways of perceiving ideas, events, or situations"

(Robson & Troutman-Jordan, 2014, p. 56). They put forward four defining attributes of cognitive reframing: sense of personal control; altering perceptions of negative beliefs; converting a self-destructive idea into a supportive idea; and aiming to change behaviour and improve well-being.

**Our context**

We were paired together as a dyad in a formal mentoring program run by our faculty: Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne. The program uses a "bifocal approach" (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016) which, in our context, specifically aimed at both individual development for early-career academics and organisational improvement from the faculty's perspective. While our program was not limited to women, the bifocal approach is theorised as a "feminist intervention", linking transformative organisational change with development of women as individuals (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016, p. 429). The year-long program was comprised of mentee workshops, a peer mentoring component, and the senior–junior mentoring dyads which represent the focus of our discussion in this paper.

The two of us had not met before the program. RM is an ethicist, and was in the final year of her post-doctoral research project. This was RM's first experience of formal mentoring. As a professor and head of an academic department (Social Work), MC was experienced in mentoring staff both within the university program, and in the context of her departmental role. Within our dyad meetings, we were free to choose our own topics and direction.

RM initiated the first meeting via email. We arranged to meet in a café on campus, and RM sent her CV in advance of the meeting. In that first meeting we discussed our career paths to date, and RM's reasons for signing up for the mentoring program. Following that initial getting-to-know-you meeting, we met approximately monthly in MC's office over coffee for about an hour. We did not explicitly discuss confidentiality, but both of us assumed that our discussions would be confidential. The topic for each meeting was not set in advance; we would usually begin with MC asking RM "What would be useful to talk about today?" We got along well, and had strong rapport and trust from the outset; this may be because the dyads were established by a colleague who knew each of us individually. At the end of each meeting, we would make a time for the next meeting. At the completion of the program year, we stayed in touch via email and met several times to catch up (and develop this paper).

During our mentoring discussions, we covered various topics based on RM's current challenges. These topics included:

- the challenge of navigating towards promotion;
- the challenge of developing a research *niche*, including independent projects and new collaborations;
- the challenge of having an impact within an organisation as an early or mid-career researcher.

Each of these challenges is nested within an organisational context that can be reframed through mentoring discussions – in ways that point to positive steps forward for the mentee.

**From promotion to ambition**

At the start of our year together, RM was keen to explore promotion. Reflecting upon her mentoring experiences over time, MC was struck by how frequently the first mentoring conversation starts with some version of "I want to get promoted". Promotions within university contexts very often sit within discourses of organisational conservatism (the bar is unreasonably high in my university), personal aversion ("I hate having to sell myself"), and confidence ("I'm not really sure what's needed and I'm probably not ready"). These discourses can be reinforced when others are unsuccessful in academic promotions, adding to what may be already well integrated assumptions about what is required and what it takes to be successful. These ideas can become entrenched in unhelpful ways, where one set of assumptions builds on another and the opportunity to see the issue through an alternative lens becomes more (and more) difficult. The version of these discourses that RM was experiencing is illustrated in Figure 1.

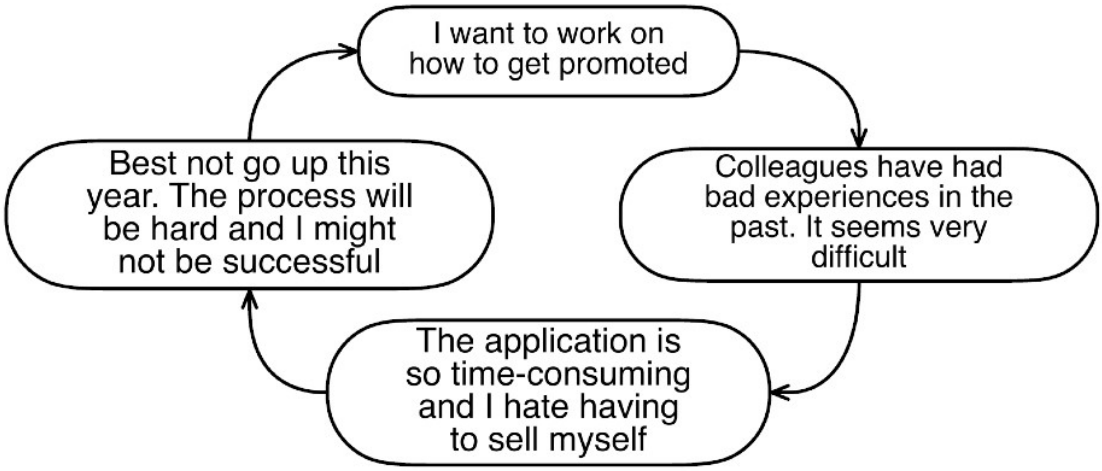


**Figure 1.** Restrictive thinking about promotion.

Reframing conversations within a mentoring context can help to shift thinking toward more progressive opportunities. Appreciating that promotion conversations have the potential to become focused on barriers that risk introducing and reinforcing these constraining ideas, MC reframed the conversation from a focus on promotion to the ambitions RM had for her work (see Figure 2): excellence, recognition and influence. The powerful reframing question here, in our experience, was "What needs to happen to become famous in your field?" This enabled quite a different conversation that included an exploration of opportunities: shifting from under the wing of more senior academics; carving a unique scholarly contribution that would make a critical advancement to the field; and developing an action plan to achieve this. An incidental consequence of the conversations was that, in developing a plan for advancing her work and career, RM was able to use this clarity of vision in her (successful) application for promotion.

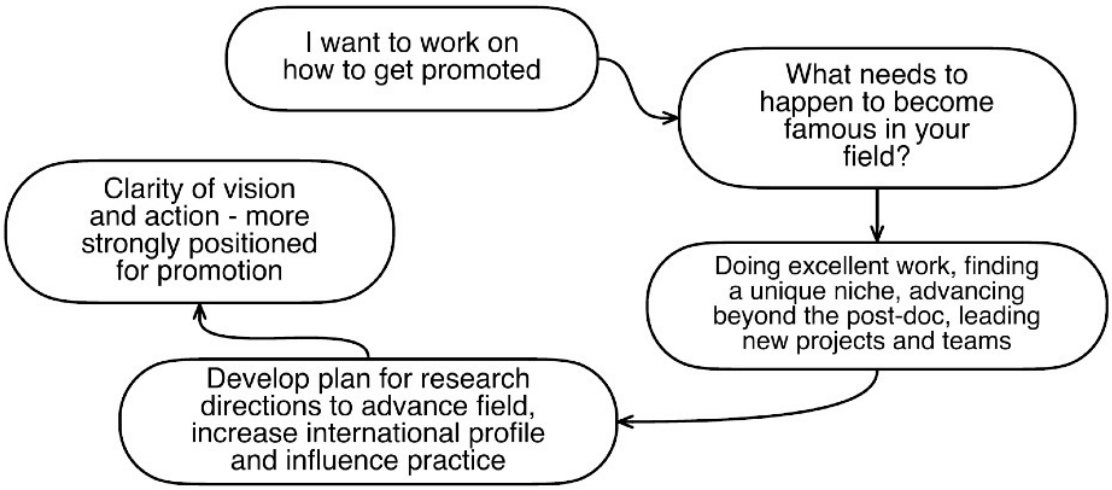


**Figure 2.** Reframing the challenge around ambition.

## From funding constraint to opportunity

A second area that can frequently constrain an early-career academic's sense of possibility is the availability of funding to support initiatives. Over many years, academics have relied upon research grants and project funds to support scholarly activities. In an increasingly conservative and competitive contemporary funding climate, support for activities such as international collaboration is harder to come by. This places early-career academics in a particularly difficult position, since they may not have either the established networks or the track record to secure the limited funding available. Despite recognising that international research collaborations are important, discussion of funding constraints can generate unhelpful conversations that reinforce inaction (Figure 3).

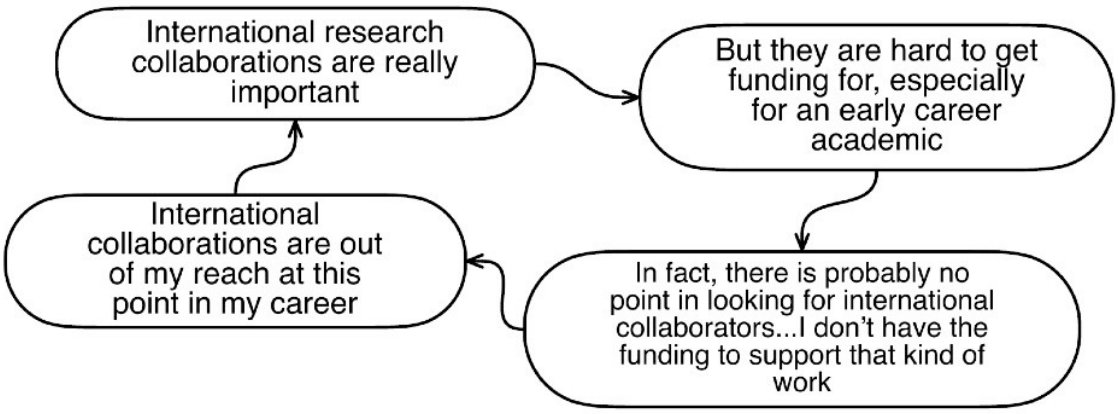


**Figure 3**. Restrictive thinking about funding constraints.

Reframing mentoring conversations can explore alternative opportunities that focus on solutions (Figure 4). The key reframing question for this challenge was "Is funding necessary to bring people together?" Discussion of MC's experience of different types of international collaboration reframed this challenge, opening up possibilities for collaborative work that were not funding-dependent. For example, universities across the world have conference centres that host international collaborations and colloquiums that tap

into the motivation scholars have to network with new and established academics and contribute to their field on an invitation-only, self-funded basis (Connolly, Williams, & Cooper, 2017). Self-funded colloquia reduce the need for grant-seeking efforts, often costing participants far less than it would to attend international conferences. At the same time, they allow the flexibility to create small-scale scholarly events that can explore topics in depth. This creates the potential to shift conversations from a context of funding constraint to a context of opportunity.

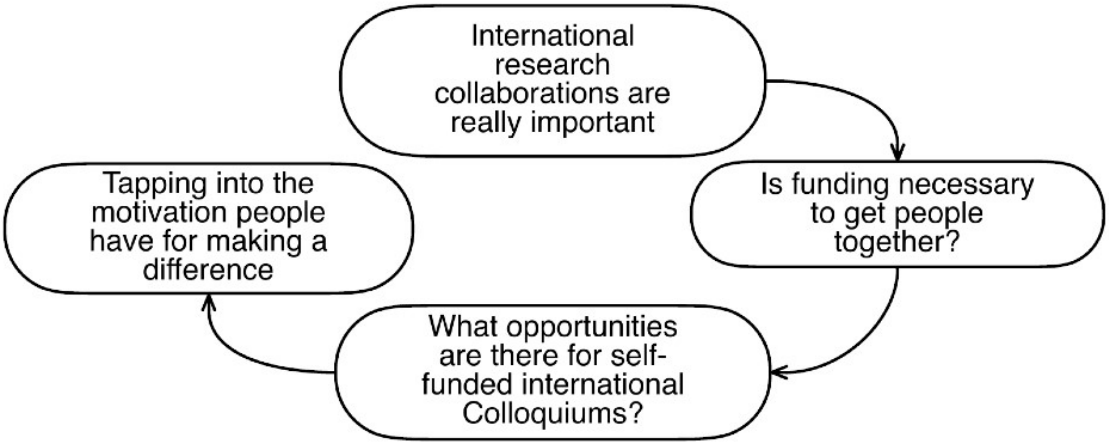


**Figure 4.** Reframing the challenge around opportunity.

## From hierarchy to leadership

Universities can be experienced as highly hierarchical environments (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2015). As is typical in universities, in our context, academic staff are overtly ranked through their job titles and opportunities to contribute to strategic decision-making are limited for more junior academics. Early-career staff are deeply affected by organisational decisions and culture, yet struggle to shape that culture from their position within the hierarchy. A feeling of powerlessness can limit junior academics' sense of themselves as agents with influence over their work environment. Again, as with the two challenges discussed previously, this perspective has the potential to reinforce inaction.

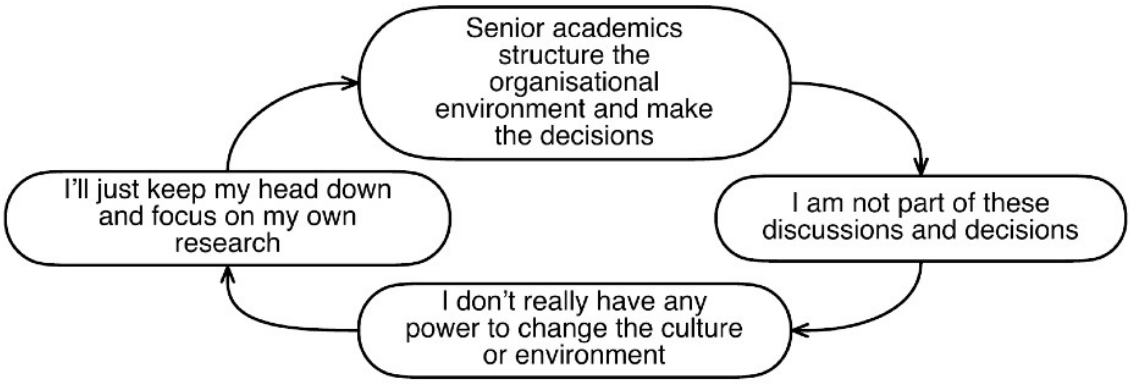


**Figure 5.** Restrictive thinking about the organisational hierarchy.

The challenge of hierarchy can be reframed as the challenge of leadership. A key mentoring question in this context was: "What are the opportunities for you to make a difference?" The concept of "small acts of leadership" (Hunter, 2016) was powerful for RM; it enabled us to think and talk about leadership in terms of action rather than position, and to focus on ways in which RM could contribute to changing the local culture and working environment. Positive responses to small actions fuelled a sense of positivity and power.


**Figure 6.** Reframing the challenge around leadership.

## CONCLUSION

For us, the process of reframing involved these key questions that we have described followed by further reflective discussion. In our discussions, MC supported RM in thinking about these challenges in ways that increased personal control, drawing at times on MC's own career experiences but primarily focused on RM's context: this involved a lot of attentive listening on both sides. We rarely spent time formulating concrete next steps, instead creating space to explore the reframed challenge and adjust to a different way of thinking about the issue.

Inevitably, there will be barriers and challenges involved in this approach to mentoring – both in a social work context and in other disciplinary environments. While the reframing discussions were powerful, maintaining the new perception in other contexts where negative perceptions were expressed was an ongoing challenge. It is also important to note that both of us come from disciplines where personal reflection and challenging conversations are part of the disciplinary toolkit. For academics from other disciplines where these skills are not a standard part of their professional skillset, this type of discussion could be experienced as significantly more challenging or confronting. Further, both of us brought to the mentoring encounters a genuine interest in each other's careers and experiences, and an openness to change. Lacking this orientation would be a substantial barrier to this type of mentoring conversation, in our view.

We have presented just three examples of the kinds of ways in which mentoring conversations can use reframing, specifically in the context of academia. Our three examples were

reframing from promotion to ambition, from funding constraint to opportunity, and from hierarchy to leadership. University environments can be dominated by an emphasis on output metrics and a notion of linear progression which, in turn, cultivate a certain perspective on early-career challenges. Mentoring programs can offer an important antidote to this perspective, partly by creating a space for reframing challenges. Reframing, in our experience, can be powerful in shifting focus from the problem to potential solutions, and in opening up enriching and stimulating mentoring conversations.

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