In the hushed darkness of a chilly night, a fire truck carrying six men rolled toward its Brooklyn firehouse. They had just finished up at a women’s shelter, where steam wisping from an iron had set off an alarm. Not much to it . . . for Jordan Sullivan, another 15 hour shift was unspooling without what he so eagerly awaited. A fire. In his 96 days in the field as a firefighter, the Rock, as it’s familiarly known—it had not happened. Around the firehouse, the veterans continually swapped fire stories. That was how they both taught and regaled one another, and the stories were good ones. He could not contribute. He hadn’t had a fire (Kleinfield, 2014, p. A1).

Mentors are all around us. In our own lives—both professional and personal—they help us set goals, navigate difficult situations, overcome challenges, develop skills, and learn the ropes. But how is it that mentors impart their wisdom? How do they act on the influence they have? What do they say to inspire and role model for their protégés? Those questions about how mentors actually mentor are at the heart of the current research.

Mentoring relationships are central themes in many forms of popular culture and literature. Mentors appear in Homer’s Odyssey, Frankenstein, and the Great Gatsby (Alleman & Clarke, 2000; Colley, 2002; Dougherty, Turban, & Haggard, 2007; Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2007), but also in more contemporary films. For example, the 1988 American classic, Bull Durham, is a baseball movie, but it is also a film about mentoring. Crash Davis, a veteran player is brought into the minor leagues to educate and teach Ebby LaLoosh (aka Nuke, a hotshot rookie pitcher), but, while instructing Nuke on methods of control for his chaotic pitching, Crash also acclimates Nuke to the pressure facing major league hitters while teaching him the ins and outs of a baseball career (Mount & Shelton, 1988). Jump ahead to 2013 and the R-rated hit film The Wolf of Wall Street depicting Matthew McConaughey in a brief role early on in the film as Mark Hanna, mentor to Jordan Belfort (played by Leonardo DiCaprio). It is Hanna’s questionable advice that transforms Belfort from a young, naïve, newly licensed trader to the vile, scandalous crook that overshadows the screen for nearly three hours (Hill, 2013). Belfort starts by thinking,

But if you can make your clients money at the same time, it’s advantageous to everyone, correct?

To which Hanna retorts,
The name of the game? Move the money from your client’s pocket into your pocket (Scorsese, 2013).

In essence, Crash and Hanna are mentoring Nuke and Belfort by providing essential career advice, offering personal support, helping them understand the way the industries work, and teaching them how to be good at their jobs.

What these examples shed light on is not simply mentoring in popular culture. They point to an underresearched area of the mentoring literature—how exactly it is that mentors help their protégés learn. The body of literature on mentoring and related forms of developmental interactions has identified many of the complex interpersonal, psychosocial, and outcome-related issues of mentoring, but the nature of the developmental interactions that take place between mentors and their protégés is less understood. This exploratory study will examine one possible way that those relationships are manifest—it will examine what role, if any, storytelling serves in mentoring interactions and how stories help mentors fulfill advice-giving, supportive, and other developmental functions of mentoring.

Our motivation behind studying storytelling in the mentoring context stems from the power of stories themselves. First, stories are multidimensional (Simmons, 2001), so they go beyond just giving an audience an example. Second, stories illustrate what one means without imposing too much detail to convey the idea of what is involved (Denning, 2005). Moreover, the act of telling a story adds emotion and visual details to the dialogue; in this way, storytelling is the process of translating the narrative into a compelling picture to which people can relate (Denning, 2005; Schank, 1990; Simmons, 2001). As a result, storytelling allows for truthful, clear, and natural communication (Denning, 2005). Because mentoring scholars have indicated a gap in understanding how mentors perform their functions (Chan, 2008), the current study will provide valuable insight into this underexplored area.

**Theoretical Background and Relevant Literature**

Underpinning this research is a basic assumption that protégés learn from their mentors. Social learning theory would argue that protégés can observe mentors as models, they can imitate them, and they can learn from the mentor’s experiences through a social exchange or socialization process (Bandura, 1986; Byrne, 2015; Kreitner & Luthans, 1984). That theoretical context helps to explain how mentors can serve a developmental function for their protégés whereby protégés need not only learn from experiencing something themselves. Rather, they can learn by observing others or through a social process—akin to mentoring and, in this case, storytelling. The following pages provide more detail on the learning-by-mentoring process, the functions it provides, and what that exchange or interaction can look like.

**Mentoring Literature**

The concept and practice of mentoring has been studied in a variety of disciplines including education, psychology, and management, making it an interdisciplinary concept (Archard, 2012; Barker & Pitts, 1997; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Jacobi, 1991; Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006; Wilde & Schau, 1991). Although many definitions of mentoring have been offered in these fields, most tend to agree that mentoring is a developmental interaction or partnership (Chao, 1997; D’Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003; Garvey & Alred, 2003; Kram, 1985; Lester & Johnson, 1981; Noe, 1988; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993; Peper, 1994; Roberts, 2000; Sanchez et al., 2006; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001) in which a senior colleague (mentor) provides support and guidance to a junior colleague (protégé) for the protégé’s personal/professional growth (however, the mentor and protégé can be on the same hierarchical level, in a reverse mentoring relationship with a mentor junior to the protégé, or part of a group of mentors (D’Abate et al., 2003; Eby et al., 2007; Eddy, D’Abate, Tannenbaum, Givens-Skeaton, & Robinson, 2006; Kram, 1985; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Noe, 1988). Mentoring is sometimes characterized as a relationship that can be intense and emotional (Kram, 1985; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Shapiro, Hazeltine, & Rowe, 1978) or it can be seen as a process defined by the functions it provides (D’Abate et al., 2003; Eby, 1997; Jacobi, 1991; Noe, 1988; Scandura, 1992). For example, its meaning has been based on the specific functions of upward mobility and support it provides to the protégé (Ragins, 1997; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Singh, Bains, & Vinnicombe, 2002) or, more specifically, learning, career development, and/or emotional support functions through a variety of behaviors such as coaching, goal setting, role modeling, encouraging, and socializing or orienting the protégé to the company or industry (D’Abate et al., 2003; Jacobi, 1991; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In the context of the current study, though, one definition stands out. Lester and Johnson (1981) define mentoring as a “one-to-one learning relationship between an older person and a younger person that is based on modeling behavior and extended dialogue between them” (p. 119). This notion of extended dialogue is what is in question in the current study—its substance, its meaning, its function, and its role in delivering mentoring’s value.

**Functions of Mentoring**

There has been a good bit of attention paid to the functions mentoring serves. From (a) psychosocial functions that build the protégé’s self-confidence and sense of identity to (b) career-related functions focusing on career/organizational advancement, to (c) role modeling functions (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Burke, 1984; Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988; Scandura, 1992; Scandura & Viator, 1994),
mentoring has emerged as a complex interpersonal construct. It can be broken down into 15 subfunctions that fall into career, psychosocial, and role modeling categories (Jacobi, 1991) or into a nomological network of 23 behaviors connected to three high-level learning, career progression, and emotional/psychosocial support functions (e.g., teaching, advising, problem solving, affirming, and confidence building; D’Abate et al., 2003).

**Types of Mentoring**

In addition to serving a number of functions, mentoring can take various forms. Some mentoring relationships are more traditional wherein the mentor is older or at a higher hierarchical level and works face-to-face with the protégé via a formal mentoring program or a more informal, spontaneous, or serendipitous means of finding a good developmental partner (Dougherty et al., 2007; Eby et al., 2007; Johnson, 2002; Johnson & Ridley, 2004; Mullen, 2003, 2005). However, mentoring can take many alternative forms; some of those include group mentoring, reverse mentoring, distance/e-mentoring, and multiple mentor situations (Baugh & Scandura, 1999; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Murphy, 2012; Williams, 2000).

**Benefits of Mentoring**

Even though mentoring can take many forms and offer a variety of developmental functions to the protégé, it can also be a two-way street with the relationship benefiting the mentor (and the organization) as well as the protégé. A mentor can find career enrichment in the form of improved job performance, productivity increases, enhanced sources of information, a broader network, expanded technical/managerial/interpersonal skills, unexpected recognition in the organization, a more motivated staff, as well as the good feelings (i.e., psychic rewards) of helping others and being energized by a protégé’s fresh perspective (Allen & Eby, 2003; Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Domeyer, 1999; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Hezlett & Gibson, 2007; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978; Mullen, 1994; Mullen & Noe, 1999; Noe, 1988; Ragins & Scandura, 1999).

Protégés, of course, can benefit from improved job performance, increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, a stronger skill/knowledge set, more confidence, a broader perspective, more understanding of the field/industry/job, higher pay, and faster promotions (Allen et al., 2004; D’Abate, 2009; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Koberg, Boss, & Goodman, 1998; Mullen, 1994; Noe, 1988; Scandura, 1992). But what surprises some is that the benefits of mentoring can far exceed the mentor or the protégé—the organization can benefit as well. Mentoring has been shown to benefit businesses with the knowledge transfer that occurs, improved productivity, greater employee loyalty, increased employee motivation, and lower turnover (Crosby, 1999; Domeyer, 1999; Egan & Song, 2008; Ragins, 1999). Mentoring also allows businesses to facilitate growth via enhanced promotion of the corporate culture (Singh et al., 2002; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003; Wilson & Elman, 1990).

**The Mentoring Interaction**

Despite all that is known about mentoring, the functions it serves, and the benefits it brings, not as much is known about what exactly occurs in the developmental interaction itself. We do know that the location of the interaction and the mode of communication affect the relationship (Rutter, 1987; Sullivan, 1995). For example, face-to-face and distance (email, telephone, and Internet chat) interactions can result in different outcomes. We also know the duration of the relationship and the frequency with which the mentor and protégé interact will affect the outcomes of the mentorship. For instance, studies have shown that relationships are more valuable when the interactions are more frequent and when the individuals involved have known one another for an extended period of time (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Enscher & Murphy, 1997; Geiger-DuMond & Boyle, 1995; Locke & Latham, 1990). In addition, the extant literature tells us the interactions themselves can be focused on different developmental topics: work/life advice (i.e., centered around balancing work and family, managing stress), career advice (in which the focus is on the protégé’s career path, networking, and advancement), and job/skill/task advice (giving advice on a job-related task or problem (Eddy et al., 2006; Gaskill, 1993; Scandura, 1997; Seibert, 1999).

Yet with all that we know about mentoring interactions, researchers still do not know enough about how the protégé learns. There is some exploratory research suggesting that protégés tend to learn through observation and explanations from their mentors—observing the mentor’s behaviors and the way she or he interacts with others (Archard, 2012; Hezlett, 2005; Zagumny, 1993). For example, in the current study, a Chief Financial Officer described a time in his career when observation helped him learn:

[I] observed [a senior management officer] managing other people because he wasn’t the smartest kid on the block and he wasn’t the toughest kid on the block and he was managing wheelers and dealers and doing it effectively. And so my boss and I spent a lot of time looking at people in the organization, figuring out how they manage people, and figuring out how to manage them as a result of those observations.

Another way protégés may learn is through explanation. Hezlett (2005) suggests that, in some way, the mentor is explaining something to the protégé by giving advice, offering information, and/or explaining how to do something. Protégés also learn from their interactions with their mentors (Hale, 2000), by “gaining insights from the impact their mentors’ behavior had on them” (Hezlett, 2005, p. 518). Despite the role that observation and explanation may play in how protégés
learn, more research is needed to examine this process—in other words, what is it that occurs in the mentoring interaction that helps the protégé learn, grow, and develop?

**Storytelling**

One possible way that protégés may learn is through stories told by their mentor. Storytelling has received some attention for its applications in adult learning, coaching, faculty development, and management development (Caminotti & Gray, 2012; Carr & Ann, 2011; Shadiow, 2013), and a recent study on mentoring has identified this potential in mentoring exchanges. Chan (2008) sought to understand mentor practices for predoctoral students and noted that “little research has been conducted on the actual practices in a mentoring relationship, [and] it is unclear how mentors fulfill [mentoring] functions” (p. 264). Chan’s article identified validation, responsiveness, and giving time as mentoring practices in the four mentoring dyads she studied—sharing candid stories about their own personal experiences in graduate school was another mentoring practice that emerged from her data. However, little focus was given in the article to what those stories might have been about or how (as a mentoring practice) they served mentoring functions.

Because stories tend to illustrate points better than simply stating the point themselves (Schank, 1990), a story can be defined as a narrative account of an event, or events, that weaves the relational aspects of detail, character, and values into one big picture (Denning, 2005; Gabriel, 1991; Simmons, 2001). They can be powerful mechanisms for learning as “most experiences are shared through story, some long, some short, but always through a story” (Caminotti & Gray, 2012, p. 431). Stories are comprised of layers; the external layer focuses on the aspects of the story that is analyzed and dissected into parts, while a story’s internal layer focuses more on the actual experience and how that experience conveys an image and/or message (Denning, 2005). Stories can enhance one’s perspective, change perceptions, or motivate the listener as they persuade and influence others, create community, transmit knowledge, and share wisdom (Brown, Denning, Groh, & Prusak, 2005; Caminotti & Gray, 2012; Simmons, 2001). It has been said that “we value stories because they are like reports of research projects, only easier to understand, remember, and use” (Klein, 1998, p. 182). It makes sense, then, that storytelling has been used as a tool for learning in a multitude of disciplines including history, English, and business. In business, the concept has been seen as both a management development tool as well as a career development tool. According to Denning (2001),

> Storytelling enables the individuals in an organization to see themselves, the situation they are currently in, and the organization in a different light and accordingly take decisions and change their behavior in accordance with these new perceptions, insights, and identities (p. xiv).

It enables people to connect to what is important and helps them make sense of their current situation within society, business, an organization, or their own careers. Therefore, based on this understanding, it is plausible that storytelling is one way that protégés learn during a mentoring interaction, yet as Carr and Ann (2011) note, “What eludes us is a breadth and depth of analysis of how coaches [or mentors] use stories and for what reasons” (p. 237).

**Statement of Purpose**

From the preceding discussion, it should be evident that how mentors help their protégés learn is an underresearched area of the mentoring literature. Given that (a) mentoring is a valuable developmental relationship for protégés, mentors, and their employing organizations and that (b) researchers have identified the functions mentoring serves, the common types of mentoring relationships, and some characteristics of the interaction, the means by which this developmental support and sharing of expertise occurs still deserves more clarification. Granted, exploratory research has suggested that protégés learn through observation, explanation, and interaction with their mentor or mentors (Hezlett, 2005). However, the actual interactions that are occurring, the topics of conversation, and the mechanics of sharing expertise remain unknown—a gap that is particularly evident when storytelling has been argued to serve as a powerful mechanism for learning.

For that reason, the current study attempts to bridge the mentoring and storytelling divide to explore how a mentor’s stories could be the mechanism that shares the mentor’s expertise, teaches the protégé, gives the protégé advice and encouragement, and boosts the protégé’s confidence, while possible serving other mentoring functions (D’Abate et al., 2003; Jacobi, 1991). This exploratory research will, therefore, examine storytelling for its role in mentoring interactions.

**Method**

To examine the utility of storytelling in mentoring, the current research utilized qualitative methods to capture rich descriptions of mentoring interactions and to enhance understanding of the context of any storytelling event that was recounted (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Paired with an exploratory approach, we examined whether stories are an effective or ineffective tool in mentoring, as well as explored what characteristics of stories are effective in fostering learning and development.

**Sampling**

It was not our goal to study mentoring in a particular field or industry; instead, we sought participants from a variety of industries and backgrounds who were currently serving as someone’s mentor or who had been a mentor or a protégé.
Convenience and purposive sampling techniques (Kerlinger, 1986; Stone, 1978) allowed us to identify these participants. Given that one of the researchers had a family member who was in a C-suite position and had worked with many different industries over the years, she had access to this large circle of personal contacts/acquaintances who could speak to the experience of storytelling as part of the mentoring relationship or interaction. From this pool of prospective participants, we utilized a snowball sampling method—asking interviewees to offer one or two names of other individuals who might also meet the needs of the study (Welch, 1975). Such procedures produced a pool of 39 interviewees varying in age from 26 to 60+ years old, with nearly half (48.7%) between 51 and 60 years. Of the sample, 54% were male and 46% were female. They represented a wide array of industries including law, medicine, marketing, finance, religion, food and beverage, consumer products, telecommunications, and sales and held high-level positions in their respective fields (e.g., Chief Financial Officer, CEO and President, Clinical Psychologist, Executive Director of Compliance, Executive Vice President of Sales, and Senior Vice President of Marketing).

**Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis**

The interviews were held face-to-face in either the participant’s office or a neutral location (e.g., coffee shop) and followed a semistructured interview protocol (see the appendix) which comprised of open-ended questions pertaining to mentoring relationships the participants had been in or were in at the time. We started by gaining consensus around the central concept of mentoring by discussing a definition of the term. We, then, asked participants open-ended questions about their experiences as a mentor and/or a protégé (e.g., can you think of someone you’ve mentored or who has mentored you, what did you learn from them, etc.). They were then asked to share a story (or stories) that they had told to their protégés or had been told by their mentors. Participants were asked to specifically describe what they learned from the stories and how they applied the lessons to their careers, or—from the mentor’s perspective—what they were trying to teach their protégés through the stories. The interviews were recorded with permission and then transcribed; recordings were destroyed following transcription with only the researchers having access to the recordings. After transcribing, the interviews were analyzed on a password protected spreadsheet by the researchers using textual analysis, in the form of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics encompasses the issues of text and interpretation while discovering the authentic message hidden within the text (Gabriel, 1991; Prasad, 2002, 2005; Rennie, 2012). In other words, hermeneutics allows researchers and interpreters to see how symbolic texts are, and how they refer to something beyond their literal meaning and beyond the author’s intended meaning (Phillips & Brown, 1993; Prasad, 2002). Hermeneutics is extremely useful in studying people and their stories (Freeman, 1997; Sandelowski, 1991) as well as organizations as it “get[s] to the kernel of events and activities by understanding the relationship between the obvious features of a text and the driving forces behind them” (Prasad, 2005, p. 40). Through hermeneutics, we examined not only the story itself but also the context of each story. The “examination of the context [of each story] sheds light on the [story] itself, whereas an examination of the text, in its turn, illuminated our understanding of [each story’s] context” (Prasad, 2005, p. 35). Moreover, studies using these methods “illustrate how lives can be understood, revealed and transformed in stories and by the very act of storytelling” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 163). Thus, by using hermeneutics, we were able to go beyond each participant’s story (or stories) at face value and discern the functions of mentoring each story provided.

Before getting to the results, it is important to illuminate this hermeneutical analysis method with an example, rather than just the description provided above. Let us use one of the stories we gathered to illustrate this method. This technology director tells a story to his protégé regarding when he first started his career. He made a significant error by deleting a mail system on the organization’s server:

I was starting, my very first year, and, I blew it. I blew it bad. My boss told me to delete a system. It was an email system where it was located. So he said “Delete the mail system.” So I went and found a directory that said “mail” and I deleted it. And then about a half an hour later, 4:30 in the afternoon, the phone started ringing. People couldn’t print, and I didn’t think anything of it, and everyone said we will deal with it in the morning. When I got in at 7:30 the next morning, people couldn’t log onto the system because that directory that said “mail” on it held all of the information for people to get on: passwords, print passwords, everything else. And there was a group of about 200 to 250 people that couldn’t work. It was bad.

Although the appearance of this story seems like just a tale of making a mistake early in one’s career, the authentic meaning, however, is much more. Using hermeneutics as our analytical method pushed us to not analyze the story by the words or sentences, but by the larger message. Being forced to think about the story as a whole, to understand the context, helped us see that the mentor, in telling this story to his protégé, is saying that everyone makes mistakes—that it is okay to fail.

Therefore, it was our method to take the story’s information and, working independently, code it according to mentoring functions from the literature. We started with the list of definitions provided by D’Abate et al. (2003) for 23 different mentoring functions and whittled that down to 12 functions that could possibly be served by storytelling. The excluded 11 functions could not be achieved via storytelling because they described activities that a mentor and protégé would actually do together (such as collaborating, when the pair actually work together; observing, when the mentor
Table 1. Coding Schema and Mentoring Functions Served by Storytelling.

| Function          | Description                                                                 | Frequency (%) in stories | Rank |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|------|
| Learning          | Mentor behaviors that enable the protégé to learn.                          |                          |      |
| Directing         | The story provides direction to help the protégé learn.                     | 4 (8%)                   | 8**  |
| Goal setting      | The story helps the protégé set goals in order to help the protégé learn.    | 3 (6%)                   | 9    |
| Role modeling     | The story role models appropriate (or inappropriate) behaviors to help the protégé learn (i.e., the protégé learns from positive/negative example of what to do or not to do). | 21 (44%)                 | 2    |
| Problem solving   | The story helps the protégé examine or resolve a problem to help them learn. | 7 (15%)                  | 7*   |
| Providing feedback| The story provides some degree of feedback or constructive criticism to help the protégé learn. | 2 (4%)                   | 10   |
| Teaching          | The story helps the protégé learn expertise, skills, or knowledge.          | 23 (48%)                 | 1    |
| Emotional         | Mentor behaviors that provide emotional support to the protégé.              |                          |      |
| Affirming         | The story offers the protégé support in the form of affirmation, acceptance, or confirmation. | 10 (21%)                 | 4    |
| Calming           | The story calms the protégé by reducing his or her anxiety or stress.        | 9 (19%)                  | 5    |
| Confidence building| The story enhances the confidence or self-esteem of the protégé.             | 7 (15%)                  | 7*   |
| Encouraging       | The story encourages or motivates the protégé.                              | 8 (17%)                  | 6    |
| Supporting        | The story provides the protégé with social, emotional, or personal (i.e., psychosocial) support. | 4 (8%)                   | 8**  |
| Career progression| Mentor behaviors that help the protégé with his or her career progression.    |                          |      |
| Socializing       | The story socializes or orients the protégé to the organization, industry, or field. | 13 (27%)                 | 3    |

Note. These functions were derived from D’Abate, Eddy, and Tannenbaum’s (2003) framework of mentoring and developmental interaction functions. A number of functions from that framework did not apply to the current study because they involved activities that a mentor and protégé would actually do together (e.g., a mentor observing a protégé, a mentor providing a protégé with an opportunity to practice a skill), rather than functions that could be served by a story (e.g., a mentor encouraging a protégé with his or her story). Some functions resulted in equal frequencies; their rank is the same and is indicated with an asterisk * or **.

observes the protégé for developmental feedback; or introducing, when the mentor aids the protégé’s career progression via contacts and networking). Table 1 lists the resulting 12 mentoring functions, grouped into three categories that had potential for being served by storytelling. This coding taxonomy (LeCompte, 2000) was the basis for our hermeneutical analysis; in other words, it was our coding schema whereby we coded the overall message of each story for the functions it was serving.

To further clarify our method, we coded the sample story above as providing the emotional support function of affirmation by offering the protégé support in the form of acceptance and confirmation. This story also served a teaching function—in the sample text, the mentor was teaching the protégé about failure. As the mentor stated,

I was trying to teach [my protégé] that it’s not failing that is the issue here. It’s [how] you deal with the failure [and] what you learned from the failure.

Validity Issues

First, in regard to data saturation, which is a key component in the validity of research findings (Fusch & Ness, 2015), we subscribed to general convention among qualitative researchers. For example, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) note, “Twelve interviews should suffice” with larger samples for less clear research questions (p. 79), and Fusch and Ness (2015) indicate that saturation occurs when additional data results in the same coding and themes. So, while “there is no one-size-fits-all method to reach data saturation” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1,409), we recognized we had a clearly defined research question and coding schema, so we assumed data saturation was reached when each function we were coding for was represented—with some functions present in more than 20 stories. Thus, for this study, data saturation was achieved with 48 stories culled from 39 interviewees.

Second, in keeping with methods of establishing validity in qualitative studies, three different procedures were used to determine the credibility of the inferences drawn from the data (i.e., the credibility of the research findings; Creswell & Miller, 2000; LeCompte, 2000). First, a researcher-based lens (Creswell & Miller, 2000) was applied to check reliability using Holsti’s (1969) method. We computed “the ratio of coding agreements to the total number of coding decisions” by comparing the coding patterns of one researcher against the other researcher (Holsti, 1969, p. 140). For example, if the researchers made 20 coding decisions and agreed on 15 of them, our coefficient of reliability (CR) would be .75. In this case, with agreement on 95 out of 112 pieces of data coded, an 85% CR or level of interrater agreement was
achieved. Second, a participant-based lens was applied in the form of member checking. Given the high-level positions of many of our interviewees, we were not able to meet with them a second time for the participants to confirm how the data were interpreted (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Instead, we relied on data from the participants themselves at the time of the interview. Recall that the data collection process involved asking participants to share stories from their own mentoring interactions, as well as inviting participants to explain what they thought they had learned (or in the case of mentors, what they thought they had taught) through the story in question. These data (kept separate from the story text during the coding process) helped establish validity (see “Validity” under “Results” section) and support “the ‘goodness’ of analyzed data” as it allowed the researchers to double check that the codes applied (and inferences drawn) were in agreement with what the participants thought they had learned or taught (LeCompte, 2000, p. 152). Third, Creswell and Miller explain rich, thick description as another method of establishing validity in qualitative research. Providing as much description as possible to the reader “creates verisimilitude”; in other words, the inclusion of extensive detail “produce[s] for readers the feeling that they have experienced or could experience, the events being described in a study”—in this case, making the reader understand what it is/was like to hear a story from a mentor firsthand (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). For this reason, we present extensive description of the storytelling data collected.

**Results**

The 39 interviews provided 48 stories rich in detail and significantly different from one another. For example, some of the stories told were in the third person, were short and straight to the point, and used sayings to help clarify the point to the protégé. Other stories were actual experiences of the interviewee or the interviewee’s mentor. These stories were effective because they produced emotion, sometimes even laughter or tears, out of both the protégé and the mentor. At the same time, other personal stories were told to bring a sense of relief to the protégés and to let them know that they are not alone—that certain situations happen to everyone.

**Mentoring Functions Served**

Analysis of the interview data demonstrated that the stories mentors tell their protégés serve a variety of key mentoring functions—some serving one function while others serving several (see Table 1 for frequency/percentages of functions being represented in stories, as well as rank from most frequently served mentoring function to least).

For example, a Director of Fixed Income Analytics reported telling her protégés a story of the challenge she had in trying to sell her company’s product to Company X:

I was selling into Boston for years and years, and [Company X] bought every product from every other vendor but me . . . I was trying to figure out how I [could] get into [Company X]. So I would visit them consistently, build relationships, and I kept calling and calling on them . . . And what happened, just in conversations, is they said that they get financial data from many different sources and there’s a lot of time they have to devote to maintain that data for the quality. And the data actually is the basis for compensation for the portfolio managers . . . so it’s very critical data. And so, they’re getting it from all of these different sources and it’s very expensive data management. Well, I knew . . . that we did the same thing for our own system. So . . . I arranged for us to do what is called a feed of data, a data feed to [Company X]. Now this goes back over ten years ago when this was not popular. Now this is a very big thing. So this was a new product for our company. We made gobs of money, and they basically told me anytime they needed more data they would call me. So it was like a cash cow. So, it really was figuring out their need and being persistent and no other vendor could do that . . . And now it’s big business, but in those years, it wasn’t. The story is talking about persistence, about not giving up because they didn’t close the door in my face. They always said, “We have no need for your product,” but I kept the conversation going.

Textual analysis showed that multiple mentoring functions were served by this story including teaching, role modeling, encouraging and motivating, problem solving, and socialization to the sales industry. First, this story provided the function of teaching by helping protégés learn how to be consultants and how to gain the trust of the client. Second, this story also provided the functions of role modeling and encouraging with its references to persistence and not giving up. This mentor’s protégés are not only able to learn from this example, but also, by seeing that their mentor did not give up when facing a challenge, the story encourages and motivates them not to give up when a situation becomes difficult. Third, the role modeling function is also served by this story. As the interviewee explained,

> [The story] talks about figuring out the [customer’s] need . . . You’ve got to figure out the need and see what in my tool chest meets that need?

Finally, the story teaches protégés about the sales industry and the challenges they could possibly face when working in the field of sales (i.e., a socialization function).

**Most Prevalent Functions**

When examining the interview data, it appears that most of the functions served by the stories were teaching and role modeling, with 23 (48%) and 21 (44%) stories exhibiting these functions, respectively. Socialization was also prevalent in the stories with 13 (27%) of the stories demonstrating this function. Calming was served by 19% of the stories, encouragement by 17%, problem solving and confidence building.
by 15%, and direction and personal/emotional support were served by 8% of the stories. The most frequent emotional support function served was affirmation with a frequency of 10 (or 21%). The following example shared by a clinical psychologist depicts a story that provides affirmation:

What I share [is] my first meeting as well as the continuation of therapy with this particular difficult patient. I had this patient that was 15 or 16 years old, and he walked into my office. All I knew about him prior to walking into my office was that he had been in the foster care system for probably about a decade, so virtually for all of his life, that he had committed arson, has been convicted of arson, and had been in juvenile hall. He had a record, and he was probably in gangs . . . . He was living at a halfway house at that point since no foster family wanted him. What I share with [my protégé] was . . . this 15 or 16 year old boy walked into my office and he closed the door and I was sitting in a chair which was in the middle of my office, and he proceeded in a very menacing way of walking 360 degrees around my chair. He was trying to set his territory. He was trying to let me know that he was a dangerous fellow. And then he pulled out his knife, it was about six or eight inches [long] and said, “I’ll just use this,” and started flicking at his fingernails. So clearly his communication to me was that he has always been in charge or that he feels that he has a need to be that way because he is always being threatened and that he was not going to be easily engaged in the process. I, then, share with her that after he had finished walking around me, this 15 or 16 year old boy with his knife, . . . the first thing that I said to him was, “In this room, everybody stays safe, so I would appreciate it if you would take your knife and put it outside and then come back in,” which he did. I think he was a little disarmed by the fact that I wasn’t freaking out. I didn’t show him fear . . . . He then came back in and he wasn’t going to talk and he was just doing this because he was mandated by the court as part of his probation and I said, “Fine, do whatever you want. Have you ever done this before?” He said, “Oh yeah. They always drag me to this or that or whatever, but this is stupid . . . . No one is going to analyze me.” [To which] I opened up a cabinet and said, “Got a lot of stuff in here. Anything interest you?” To which this 16 year old [tough kid] pulls out Candy Land.

Through hearing this story, the protégé was able to realize that she was not alone and many psychologists have experienced a situation with a difficult patient. This valuable bit of affirmation came along with a key teaching moment—helping the protégé learn skills for communicating with challenging patients.

Another story provided by an attorney provides a different perspective on the teaching function of mentoring:

One story was actually a story that was told to me, and it is . . . useful in learning how to argue an appeal. It [is] . . . about [a lawyer who] had gone up to the Court of Appeals to argue a case. He was the respondent. The appellant got up and argued. So when he got up, he said, “If the court has no questions, I’ll rest on my brief.” In the course of time, he won the appeal, and he sent the client a bill for $15,000. The client called him up and said, “You know, that is a lot of money. You said like five words.” He said, “You are right. I will send you a new bill . . . . A trip to the Court of Appeals and argument is $1,000. Knowing when to shut up $14,000.”

In essence, her mentor was teaching her how to argue an appeal and that:

You have to know when not to talk . . . [and] when to stop talking.

As for confidence building (a form of social–emotional support), a physician reported telling the following story to medical school students who are smart but (according to her) not very sure of themselves—this is not a story she tells to students who exude arrogance in any way, but to those who need to know it is okay to be assertive sometimes in their medical careers. According to this mentor,

They have to know that there is a place for assertiveness . . . One of the stories I tell is one where I was an intern and . . . the low man on the totem pole. A ten year old girl came in unconscious and she was found to be a juvenile diabetic. As the first person to see her, I got close to her grandmother who was actually watching her over Christmas break while her parents were away. The grandmother was quite agitation, of course. This happened all of a sudden and the patient was going into shock, so I was with them first and for most of the time. I felt that she needed more fluids. My senior resident disagreed and I stayed with her all night and kept turning up her IV to give her more fluids. He would come in and get very agitated with me because he disagreed. He lowered the IV rates, and I was in a difficult situation because I felt I was inexperienced, but I wanted to trust my gut reaction. But I kept sneaking the IV in, and I stayed with her all night as she went into shock. And it got worse, and she eventually had to go to the operating room . . . . The surgeon who went in was horrified and said he hadn’t seen anything like that in a child in his career. She died, and I was touched deeply by it. I had gotten close to the family and the girl and [I] was emotionally conflicted because I felt like I could have saved her if I had stood up [more] for myself . . . . In medicine, when someone dies, we have what is called a morbidity and mortality conference where they go over the case and see why someone died. It was very emotional for me and the people who were supporting the senior resident who had presented his case to put himself in a better light. I got angry and told them . . . “I don’t make a good Nazi. I didn’t want to follow orders.” And they were saying, “But you are only an intern and you were supposed to follow orders and you didn’t follow orders.” The surgeon supported me, but, because of my outburst, they threatened to kick me out of the program and, at that point, I had to decide . . . . “Well,” I said, “then kick me out. I feel like what I did was responsible, and I took care of my patient the best way I could.” . . . . There is a downside to not being assertive when deep down you know that you are right.

Given that mentoring can serve three high-level functions (learning, emotional support, and career progression), it is
also important to recognize that one story alone can accomplish all three functions. Analysis of the following story from an Executive Vice President of Sales shows that the sharing of a personal career experience can satisfy role modeling (learning), affirmation (emotional support), and socialization (career progression) needs for a protégé:

There was a new buyer at [Superbig Grocery Store]. Sales in the first six months were through the roof. We were so pleased . . . I went in with a sales report and an award. We had, at these times . . . little . . . trophies. So I gave him the sales report, and he took the report and ripped it up and threw it in the garbage. And I was with a broker sitting next to me, and I looked at the broker and he didn’t say a word and gave me no direction. I was like, “Oh boy, what do I do now?” Well, we would like to present you with this . . . award. I gave him the little trophy, and he took it and threw it in the garbage. I started sweating. I felt it dropping down the sides of my body. He says, “Do you know what you are doing right now?” And I said to him, “I have no idea what I am doing right now.” Well, he said something like “I was wasting his time and my time” and he said, “there is only one way to sell apple juice, 99 cents.” Well, I said, “Listen, at 99 cents, I lose money.” He says, “You are not listening to me. That is the only way to sell the product, 99 cents. Alright? This meeting is over. Get out of here.” And I said, “Okay.” And I got up and the broker followed me out. And we are in the hallway and I said, “Oh man!” And the broker says to me, “You were great in there.” I said “What? I was great in there?” He says, “You were great.” I said “How? Were you in the same meeting that I was in?” Because that meeting in there, that was not great!” He says, “He was trying to get you upset. He was trying to get his something out of you, and you didn’t let him get to you.” And I said, “Well, I didn’t do that on purpose because I was really scared in there.” Turned out, the second we left the office, he went to the garbage and he took out the trophy, and he ran down the hall to one of the owners of [Superbig Grocery Store] . . . and he says, “Look at what I just won! Look at what I just got!” So he was trying to get me upset. This is some of the enjoyment he got in dealing with the power. He is the buyer. This is where the power is. I’m the salesman. I’m the low level guy and, by not overreacting and by not getting into a fight, he took a liking to me and he thought I was honest when I said I can’t afford this.

In terms of role modeling, the story itself is about how the mentor dealt with this tough situation, which provides an example of how the mentee might deal with one too. In addition, the text of this story serves a valuable socialization function—telling the protégé how things work in this field. Finally, as the interviewee himself noted,

[There are] a lot of situations where buyers have been rude, crude, mean, . . . and it is okay to take it . . . You can’t win every battle. You are going to lose some. It’s okay to just go back and try again.

That statement alone explains why this narrative provides acceptance and affirmation to a protégé who hears it.

Validity

As described earlier, one of several methods utilized to establish validity in this qualitative, exploratory study was member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Indeed, the textual data of the stories paired with member-checking data (gathered at the time of the interviews, but kept separate during hermeneutical/textual analysis) did provide a good bit of evidence that the inferences drawn were in agreement with what the participants thought they were teaching or learning. For example, we coded the following story from a global market research executive as serving a role modeling function of mentoring:

This is a story [about something that took place] at a very big meeting with a very large, very well-known technology firm. We were bidding on a multi-million dollar study and project, and it was a bunch of our senior people which included our CEO and our President, and we worked through lunch. It was a fairly hard-fought thing because the company was fairly rigid in its thinking at that time, and they were also very strict on pricing. And we’re a quality firm . . . we demand that we, at least, get paid for the type of work that we do . . . But we also brought in a boxed lunch while we worked through lunch over this thing. Lunch was on paper plates (even though they had [porcelain] dishes there), [and] when lunch was over, our CEO (while still talking and making his point) was going around picking up the paper plates and putting them in the garbage. When the meeting was over, the CEO said, “I wanted to show them that we have humility” . . . he was teaching a lesson . . . “We’re there to be their consultants, and we will do anything for them. And, while I’m not telling them I’m going to go there and pick up their garbage for them, but just the fact that they could see the CEO of this fairly large research firm get up and help clean off the table.” He didn’t state that he was doing [it], he just did it as a matter of fact . . . as if he were in his own home.

When asked what this story about a CEO’s humility taught him, the participant explained the role modeling value. He explained how this story would show a protégé:

That I’m humble and not rigid [and it demonstrates] that we are here to serve them . . . that was the point he was making [in picking up after everyone].

So, the way in which our coding aligned with the participant’s member checking data helps establish validity in this qualitative study.

Another example from an executive communications coach also illustrates this validation process. This is a story she has told her protégé:

One of my clients asked me to shadow a group of their sales people and go out on client meetings. So we figured out a way to introduce me [as] a consultant that [could help them] . . . So I went out on a meeting with a consultant who was meeting with an older woman, her two sons, her accountant, and her attorney. And I said, “You know . . . if you were this guy going out to meet
with this group of people . . . who is the decision maker there?"
And he said, “Well, the woman, of course. It’s her money . . .
She had herself, two sons (an older and a younger son), an
accountant, an attorney, and the investment planner [who all] sat
in front of them and gave all of the eye contact and delivered all
of the data to the accountant who he thought was the person who
managed the mother’s estate. When they were all finished, he
gave a little eye contact to the attorney and to the woman and the
older brother, and as we walked out the door, I followed behind.
And the attorney and the accountant walked out the door, and
the mother and two sons followed behind on either side. And she
first looked at the older son and said, “So, what do you think?”
And he said, “I don’t know. I wouldn’t work with him. He didn’t
pay me no mind.” [And then] the mother asked the other brother,
“What do you think?” And he said, “You know, Mom, it is your
estate. But when you are gone, I’m not sure I really want to work
with this company. This guy seems like all he wants to do is
work with the decision makers. We want to have a personal
relationship with the guy that is managing our money.” So she
says okay and the company did lose that account. And it took
this investment manager a long time to regain the confidence of
the woman, and he had to spend a lot more time playing golf
with the younger brother and doing some other things to get to
know them.

Our hermeneutical analysis coded this story for serving the
teaching function of mentoring. Indeed, member checking
data from the participant confirmed this interpretation. She
explained,

Once you lose an account, it is harder to start and try to get a new
account. So when I had my protégé think about the story I just
told, we revamped his game plan for [his upcoming] meeting
because what I made him think about is in that list of data that
you want to present at the meeting, how much of it [concerns]
the younger folks—the people who are going to inherit that
estate. And he said, “You are right.” There are a couple of things
they are going to be concerned about. And I said the other thing
you need to do is to look at them when you are talking about that
data. Because if everybody is invited to that meeting, everybody
deserves equal time. Those kids wouldn’t have been invited if
mom didn’t see them as influencers and have some input on her
decision . . . the story was what taught him to be aware of,
“[Darn], I could lose this account if I don’t pay attention to who
the influencers are beyond the decision maker.”

It is reassuring that our own analytical coding process
aligned with the interpretations of the participants them-
selves. That these data were kept separate from the story data
during our coding process helped us confirm that we did “get
it right” (LeCompte, 2000, p. 152).

Discussion

The current study set out to fill a gap in the literature—to
understand what occurs in the mentoring interaction (Hezlett,
2005) or in what Lester and Johnson (1981) call the “extended
dialogue” (p. 119) between a mentor and protégé. Although a
few studies have used storytelling as a means of collecting
data on when, where, and why mentoring exchanges take
place (e.g., Spezzini, Austin, Abbott, & Littleton, 2009) or
raised the possibility that stories might play a role in mentor-
ing relationships (e.g., Chan, 2008; Jones & Brown, 2011),
the content of mentoring stories and the functions they serve
have remained unclear. In response, the current study pro-
vided evidence that storytelling is an important mentoring
practice. Both hermeneutical analysis of the narrative text of
the stories, as well as comments by the interviewees them-
selves, showed that a mentor’s stories can serve key mentor-
ing functions.

Further analysis might suggest why storytelling works in
mentoring interactions. Our participants helped us understand
the power of storytelling may rest in a number of key charac-
teristics. First, stories are real in some way so they are relatable.
A pharmaceutical communications executive told us,

The point of [the story] is that it make[s] it real . . . [this is what]
really makes a difference, that sinks in.

A clinical psychologist added,

I feel that storytelling is a really important way of communicating
in a mentoring relationship. A person relates more to a story than
to a lecture.

Indeed, it may be the emotion inherent in a story that makes
them more relatable. A technology director told us,

[Stories are] hard and emotional. The reason that storytelling
works is that you have to find the emotional ground.

Another reason storytelling might be powerful in mentoring
is because stories are rich in detail which makes them more
impactful than simple instructions or advice given without
the context of a story. One of our interviewees, a doctor,
explained,

Stories are also more than just words; they convey images.

A similar explanation was provided by the founder of a con-
sumer food products firm who told us,

It helps to give them some color, some technicolor behind an
issue . . . By giving them the experience in a story, it . . . makes
it more vivid. It makes it more memorable. It’s not just a piece
of advice; it’s advice that comes from an experience.

In summation, stories are emotional. They are memora-
ble. They do not just tell the protégé what to do or deliver
advice on a problem. Instead, they inspire. The results of this
study demonstrate that because stories are more than just
words, protégés are able to remember pieces of stories their
mentors told them and apply them to their everyday life.
Stories, therefore, are impactful—so impactful, that they
might go beyond the relationship between just one mentor and one protégé to become company folklore. As one media director explained,

I do know that parts of the stories [I tell] get retold because I hear these people . . . who repeat them when I sit in the background and watch them make presentations or interact with our internal or external clients. I hear pieces of these stories get repeated which I like because it is usually done not identical to the way that I’ve retold them. They were extrapolations of the information I was trying to convey to them.

Future Research and Limitations

Based on the results of the current study, future research might take alternate data collection paths to explore other benefits of storytelling as a means for mentoring or examine how storytelling affects other aspects of mentoring (e.g., mentoring phases). First, out of the 39 interviews, nine (23%) could not be used for data because the interviewee shared stories about when they were mentoring or being mentored, rather than the story they or their mentor used in a developmental interaction. To avoid this problem, future research might approach the semistructured interview so the interviewee is prompted in a different way:

Pretend I [the interviewer] am your protégé. What’s an example of a story you would tell me to make a point?

By placing the interviewee in a hypothetical situation, the interviewee may be able to recall a story they told to their actual protégé(s) they could not without such a prompt. In addition, the semistructured interview should include not only a definition of mentoring but also the definition of a story. Several interviewees were confused with the term story and did not realize that the experiences they share with their protégés or peers might actually include such stories. Clarification of the term and examples or personal experiences the interviewees had that fall under the definition of stories would be very useful toward the success of future studies. Finally, since this study examined how protégés learned through storytelling, future research might also examine the power of storytelling in different phases of mentoring (i.e., initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition; Chao, 1997; Kram, 1983; Levinson et al., 1978). The question might be how different types of stories are used to achieve varying developmental goals in different phases of mentoring.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations and suggestions for future research, the current research offers a perspective on mentoring that has not yet been explored in depth. It suggests that protégés learn from their mentors through mentoring interactions, specifically through the stories that mentors tell their protégés. As Hezlett wrote (2005), “ . . . the literature offers only limited insights on how protégés learn from their mentors . . . ” (p. 512), so there is still a need to examine what and how protégés learn from their mentors. Authors have only recently started to identify storytelling as a potential mechanism for mentoring (e.g., Chan, 2008), but have not provided data on story content, functions, or practices. This study satisfies at least part of that need. It suggests that stories are one way that protégés learn with the stories serving learning, emotional support, and/or career progression functions of mentoring. This exploratory study demonstrates that storytelling is, indeed, a powerful and effective mode and method of mentoring.

Appendix

Semistructured Interview Protocol

1. Initial biographical data: Gender; age range
2. Job/occupation: What is your job? What are some of the functions of your position? How would you describe it in layman’s terms? What word best describes your occupation?
3. Tenure: How long have you had this position at this company? If you worked in this field before coming to your present company, how long (altogether) have you been in this field?
4. Career stage: Would you best describe yourself in the early stages of your career? Mid-career? Or nearing retirement?
5. Mentoring definition: Let me show you a definition of mentoring. It will help to ensure that we are on the same page when we discuss your experiences . . .

Mentoring has been defined as a partnership or a developmental interaction in which a senior colleague (the mentor) provides support and guidance to a junior colleague (the mentee) for the mentee’s personal/professional growth. The mentor is usually focused on giving the mentee learning, career development, and/or emotional support through a variety of behaviors such as coaching, goal-setting, role modeling, encouraging, and socializing or orienting the mentee to the company or industry. Oftentimes, the mentor is senior to the mentee, but s/he can be on the same hierarchical level (peer mentoring), junior to the mentor (reverse mentoring), or part of a group of mentors (group mentoring) (D’Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003; Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007; Eddy, D’Abate, Tannenbaum, Givens-Skeaton, & Robinson, 2006; Kram, 1985; Lentz & Allen, 2009).

Does that make sense to you? Do you see the mentoring relationship differently? If so, how?

6. Given that definition, please think of someone that you mentor (if they do not mentor someone [or have not in the past], go to Question 7). No names please. Does this person work at the same company that you do? Do you mentor them through a formal mentoring program or informally? If informal, how did your relationship develop? Is there a particular story you
have told your mentee? You might have told this story to help them understand a point you were trying to make, to teach them something, to share your expertise, or some other reason. Please describe this story in detail. Why did you tell your mentee this story? Is this story based on your own personal experience? If not, where did you hear this story? Did you make it up? Do you think telling this story helped your mentee? How so? What do you want your mentee to remember or learn from this story?

7. Okay, let us go back to the definition of mentoring (see above). Now, think of someone who has mentored you (if you have not been a mentee, then go to end). Again, no names please. Can you recall a story that your mentor told you as part of your mentoring relationship or interactions? Please describe the story in detail. How did you feel after hearing this story? What did you learn from this story, how did it affect/help you, and how did you apply these lessons learned toward your career?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Author Biographies**

Caroline P. D’Abate is an associate professor of Management at Skidmore College, where she teaches organizational behavior, human resource management and development, and introductory business, as well as the occasional course on popular culture’s intersection with the experience of work. Her research activities center on employee development, mentoring, team dynamics, and pop culture studies. She holds a PhD in organizational studies from the State University of New York at Albany.

Hali Alpert is director of Sales Operations, Global Enterprise Solutions North America at Automatic Data Processing, LLC (ADP), and is responsible for the strategy and implementation of new procedures, programs, and tools that help the sales organization improve efficiencies and ultimately drive profitable corporate growth. She holds a BS with honors in management and business from Skidmore College.