

The Social Construction of Professional Mentorship

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The transmission of knowledge, values, methods of inquiry, and goals from one generation to the next is crucial to any scientific field for the discipline to continue (Kennedy, 1997), let alone flourish. Thus, professional mentoring processes have been considered among the more critical tasks that scholars are called to perform (Forehand, 2008). It is through mentoring that more established professionals in a field can have, perhaps, their most profound impact on emerging professionals, and indirectly, on the future of the field.

The Martin P. Levin Award was established in 2000 by Dr Wendy Newby to recognize the outstanding professional and educational mentorship that she received from Dr Ronald T. Brown, and to honor her father, Martin P. Levin—teacher, publisher, attorney, philanthropist, and author of *All I Know about Management, I Learned from My Dog* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2011) and *Letters from Angel: A True Story in her Own Words* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2012). Dr Newby said that her goal for this award was “to encourage excellence in mentoring of pre- and postdoctoral students in psychology and recognize the commitment of faculty who serve as mentors.”

Mr Levin was born in Philadelphia in 1918, the son of second-generation immigrants. After 10 years of service in the state and federal governments (including military service), he began what was to be a 37-year career in book publishing, retiring as the president of the Time Mirror Book Group, a large multidisciplinary publishing corporation. At the age of 65 years, Mr Levin graduated from the New York Law School, sat for the bar, and started his second career with a prominent law firm in New York City, where (at the time of this writing) he is still actively employed (at age 94 years). A full recounting of Mr Levin’s lifetime achievements is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that he has led a remarkable life, has

touched many people, and I suspect from what I have learned, was and is an outstanding mentor himself.

First, I want to thank the Levin family for making this award possible. Occasions like this not only are important for the individuals involved, but they also serve as a mirror on the field that allows us to consider what lessons have been learned, and what we (collectively) aspire to accomplish in our scholarly pursuits. Second, I thank the SPP Awards Committee for selecting me for this recognition. I am appreciative of the honor, and for the opportunity to reflect on my experiences as a mentor and as a protégé, and to see how I can improve in each of those roles. Third, I thank those who nominated me for this award. The nomination alone is humbling; I appreciate that you can see past my weaknesses and failings to my intentions and aspirations. Finally, I thank the people who have served as my professional and personal mentors over the years. There have been many in different roles and at several stages of my life. I want to especially recognize my graduate mentor, Dr Rex Forehand, for his profound influence on how I try to mentor my own students, and my colleague Dr Michael Roberts, for his mentorship during my transition from trainee to faculty member.

Defining the Construct

Our broad and general liberal arts education reminds us that the word “mentor” is a transliteration of the name of the wise guide who served the young man Telemachus while his father, Odysseus, was on his great journey back from the war with the Trojans. However, as noted by Rosenthal and Black (2006), professional mentorship, as a construct, has not been consistently defined, nor have the expected outcomes been uniformly delineated (Forehand, 2008).

Various authors in many contexts have defined “mentoring” or “mentorship” in a host of ways. For example, Hardcastle (1988) noted that academic mentors and counselors “(offer) their protégés unique visions of themselves, (motivate) them to grow professionally, (show) them new ways to be, and (are) spiritual supports” (p. 207). In short, she noted that mentors “catalyze” their protégés’ professional development. Perhaps similarly, Drotar (2003) emphasized the relationship and shared understanding of outcomes when he defined professional mentorship in pediatric psychology as “the privilege and opportunity to teach and learn together with a student/junior colleague in the context of a relationship of mutual respect, trust, and coordinated goals” (p. 310). Addressing professionals in higher education more generally, Johnson (2007) defined the construct as

“a personal and reciprocal relationship in which a more experienced, (usually older) faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced (usually younger) student or faculty member. A mentor provides the protégé with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge, and support in the protégé’s pursuit of becoming a full member of a particular profession” (p. 20).

Much of the writing on mentorship in professional psychology and related fields over the past decade has considered the construct through the lenses of parenting, attachment, and goodness of fit (e.g., Drotar, 2003; Forehand, 2008; La Greca, 2004; Knight, 2011). This is a valuable analogy, and it appears generally accepted that this framework for understanding mentorship emphasizes many of its more critical aspects—warmth and structure, responsiveness, expectations, and consistency. Given the similar goals of parenting and mentorship (e.g., communication of values, language, knowledge, and skills), it makes sense that similar mechanisms and attributes would facilitate both.

Although this is useful analogy, it is complicated by some fairly obvious limitations. Most importantly, my students/protégés are not my children. Unlike my children (who have very little choice in the matter), my protégés choose to work with me, and generally speaking, can choose not to be mentored by me or to limit the degree to which I influence their professional development. Furthermore, in most parenting models that I am familiar with, the responsibility of “making the relationship work” lies predominantly with the adult. In contrast, in a mentorship relationship, there is a more (although not perfectly) egalitarian distribution of responsibility for making the relationship work.

This is an important consideration because—like “good parenting”—the precise definition of “good mentorship” is often subjective to the mentor and the mentee (La Greca, 2004), and likely varies by the expectations held by the two parties. As noted by Aylward, Odar, Kessler, Canter, and Roberts (2012), “Mentoring is, after all, what the mentee says it is . . .” (p. 978). Indeed, the results from their network analysis of mentoring relationships in pediatric psychology strongly support the quote from Aylward et al.: Protégés listed a wide variety of mentorship forms, including brief and specific mentoring encounters (e.g., online mentorship on a manuscript review), series of conversations with colleagues that “shaped” professional development, and formal long-term graduate or professional mentoring in the context of a training program. Although there are no data that I know of to confirm this, the range of number and “type” of identified mentor suggests to me that some of the mentors identified by the participants in this study may have been completely unaware of their “status” as a mentor to some of the respondents.

This possibility underscores the subjectivity of the mentoring relationship to each party. Although mentorship may be (in part) what the mentee says it is, it is in no less part what the mentor believes it to be. Recognition of the potentially divergent and equally valid social constructions of each individual in a mentorship relationship seems crucial to maximizing the positive impact of the relationship. The challenge, then, is how to ensure that the mentor’s and the protégé’s constructions of mentorship agree with each other.

Mentorship as Social Construction

As part of my preparation (i.e., “research”) for this article, I asked a sample of my current and former students to anonymously describe my mentoring style. *What do I do well? What do I do poorly?* The results from this (nonscientific) poll yielded a range of perspectives on my mentoring, and reinforced the subjectivity of the construct. Although there were some commonalities across responses, I was struck by the nonoverlap in aspects of my mentoring efforts that were identified as beneficial. The diversity in what my students found helpful, together with my readings on the topic over the past few months, has led me to an appreciation for what a social constructionist view of mentorship can add to the parenting model of mentorship.

As discussed by Lucas (2001) and Mullen, Cox, Boettcher, and Adoue (2000), a social constructionist view of mentorship reminds us that “mentorship” as a

construct has no real objective definition outside the social context that created it; it is what it is because that is what we (*as a social unit*) have made it. But perhaps more importantly, this view of mentorship reminds us that we (i.e., *any unique pair of mentor and protégé*) construct a definition of mentorship as we engage in it.

What appeals to me about the social construction lens is that it helps explain some of the variance that I see in mentor–protégé relationships, both within and across unique pairs of individuals. That is, my expectations and ambivalences about aspects of the relationship may or may not align with my new protégé’s, and (which is more interesting) my expectations (or my protégé’s expectations) about the relationship at one time may differ from subsequent expectations. These deviations from expectations or changes over time can have significant influences on the nature of the relationship.

Another aspect of this lens that appeals to me is the clear directive that follows: Because each mentor–protégé relationship is socially constructed, it follows that successful relationships must develop a social contract for mentorship that meets the needs of both parties. Ideally, an explicit contract would outline the expectations for each party, and provide a context for specific interactions. However, even in the absence of an explicitly articulated contract or agreement, the definition of mentorship (and the implicit social contract) will become reified for each protégé–mentor pair as they shape and are shaped by their experiences in the relationship. The implicit “contract” will be written by our actions, and will have implications (consequences) for future behaviors.

Looking back to the conundrum posed by Aylward et al.’s (2012) network analysis results as an example, one view of mentorship argues that the mentee him-/herself defines whether “mentorship” exists (i.e., “it is what the mentee says it is”). This construction tends to follow a consumer model—the customer is always right. However, a “mentor” (even if identified as such by a protégé) might not take that identity for him-/herself, and might not share common assumptions about the relationship with the protégé. In this extreme hypothetical example, divergent ideas regarding whether a mentorship relationship even exists could result in unfavorable consequences for both the mentor and the mentee: Not knowing her/his status, a “mentor’s” glib or thoughtless comment that is taken to heart by the “protégé” can have detrimental consequences for the protégé’s professional development.

Less extreme, one can imagine how two divergent sets of expectation for a mutually agreed-on mentorship relationship could result in a “poor fit.” I recently attended the

American Council of Education’s Emerging Leaders Workshop, where we examined this very topic. When discussing various models of graduate training, one attendee from a doctoral program in another field commented, “(the graduate student) is not just my customer, (he/she) is my product and the best evidence of my success.” This represents a construction of mentorship with some obvious (and some perhaps not so obvious) implications, and one which might not be embraced by all trainees or all mentors. Without taking sides, the constructions contemplated earlier in the text reflect very different and valid perspectives, and highlight the importance of explicit social contracts to guide both mentor and protégé’s expectations and actions.

Crucial Topics for Conversation

With that in mind, I would like to offer several topics that might be considered for discussions about the expectations that the mentor and protégé each might have for the mentorship relationship. I do not here contemplate the need for a clear and honest discussion of the “fit” between training goals of the two parties. Drotar (2003) has eloquently addressed the importance of initial and ongoing fit (i.e., coordinated goals) between mentor and protégé in the graduate school arena. I have little to add to his excellent treatment of those issues—the importance of honest communication about training goals cannot be overstated. I would only suggest that “fit” be carefully considered in arenas other than graduate school (e.g., online mentoring, long-distance mentoring, and clinical or professional mentoring).

Instead, I wish to provide and consider a set of topics that might be explicitly discussed in terms of a mentorship contract in the context of some of the challenges faced by both mentor and protégé. This list, rendered from the literature, excellent thoughts from some of my current and former students, and my own observations of mentorship relationships, is not comprehensive. However, these topics might provide a good starting point for conversations about the relationship.

Priorities

First, both parties need to consider and make explicit the priority of the mentor–protégé relationship, given their various competing roles. In many or most settings, both the mentor and the protégé will have a number of competing professional roles. For example, the mentor may also be a classroom instructor, an administrator, a researcher, a clinician, a reviewer, a consultant, etc.

These roles can enhance and facilitate the mentor's ability to provide opportunities and guidance for the protégé. However, despite the importance of these other obligations, both the mentor and the student need to be clear on the priority that is placed on the mentor role. I am reminded of my graduate mentor's various obligations at the University of Georgia. Despite the many roles that he played (including being the director of a very large research institute on campus), Rex prioritized graduate training and made that clear to his students. Of course, there were days and moments in which he was unavailable to graduate students, but the overriding message that he communicated (and still communicates) is that his primary obligation and passion is for graduate training. As a result, Rex's graduate students were particularly motivated to reciprocate this level of priority.

The priority of the mentor-protégé relationship will, of course, vary by the formality of the mentorship arrangement. Consistent with Aylward et al.'s (2012) findings, Rosenthal and Black (2006) have noted that there will be a range in the types of roles associated with "mentorship." These may include very formal roles with ostensibly clear expectations (dissertation chair/doctoral candidate), to less clearly defined roles with somewhat uncertain expectations regarding the commitment of each to the other (e.g., long-distance or online mentoring). One might expect a positive correlation between formality of the mentorship arrangement and priority given to the relationship. However, even in relatively formalized roles (e.g., dissertation chair, research advisor, clinical advisor), clear expectations about the priority of the relationship in terms of institutional, program, or personal goals/contingencies will be of benefit to both parties. In essence, each party should be able to articulate how the mentoring relationship in question "fits" with other commitments within the institution (Drotar, 2003; Lucas, 2001) and to other mentors and protégés. There is no one "correct" answer to this question; the stated priority of the mentorship relationship should reflect (and be reflected in) the time and energy put into activities related to the mentorship relationship.

Roles and Responsibilities

Closely related to priorities within the institution and among other professionals and protégés are questions regarding the "team" of mentors who may be working together with any one protégé. Given that Aylward et al. (2012) reported that each mentee in their sample identified approximately six mentors, it may be particularly important to discuss the various roles of these mentors, to outline "spheres of influence" among the different mentors, and to clarify areas of overlap. Such conversations need not be

confrontational; it is both normative and beneficial for mentees to gain multiple perspectives on their professional development. However, such influences need to be disclosed to all parties. I recall a (now humorous) incident in which an advisee was writing a paper with me. While we passed drafts back and forth, I noticed a phrase that kept recurring, even after I had edited it out multiple times. When I finally asked about the persistent re-emergence of the phrase, I learned that another mentor (one that I did not know was helping with the paper) was insisting that the phrase be retained. Clearer communication about roles on that paper would have saved some amount of headache (and confusion) for all parties.

Feedback

Third, both parties need to be clear on their expectations regarding feedback. I want to underscore the courage and discipline that it takes on both parts (mentor and protégé) to give and accept feedback, respectively (see also Knight, 2011). Clearly echoing the Yerkes-Dodson law, there is a "just right" zone of the frequency and timing of feedback—probably for each unique pair of mentor and protégé. Similarly, there must be the proper motivation for providing feedback. As noted by the legendary coach Tom Landry, "A coach (or mentor, in this case) is someone who tells you what you don't want to hear, who has you see what you don't want to see, *so you can be who you have always known you could be*" (emphasis added). It is essential that the motivation for feedback is correct. However, the willingness to provide feedback (even when it is hard) and the willingness to accept feedback (even when it is hard) each demonstrates the commitment that the mentor and protégé have for the relationship. A mentor who cannot be constructive and a protégé who cannot be critiqued will probably have limited success in their relationship. Conversations about the frequency and form of feedback can prevent unnecessary misunderstanding, doubt, and frustration. Anecdotally, I have found that my own disclosure of hard feedback that I have received over the years (from friend and foe alike) enhances my ability to provide feedback to my own students.

Recognizing Mistakes

Closely related to giving and receiving of feedback, it is essential that both parties are able to recognize and constructively discuss mistakes. There is no mentor who has not made errors of commission or omission in some aspect of her/his professional life (including in their mentorship relationships), and there is no protégé who will make it through her/his training or early career without some kind of error, miscue, or professional lapse. The question is not

“if?” but “when?” How the mentor and protégé each handles her/his errors (and the other party’s) speaks volumes about the relationship and of each party’s commitment to the training/mentoring process. As a mentor, authentic recognition and ownership of my own mistakes (past and current) allow me to put my protégé’s errors into perspective, and to offer constructive suggestions that will facilitate my protégé’s professional development.

Such a stance also creates a space where the protégé can freely and genuinely seek guidance in difficult situations. I am reminded of Drotar’s (2003) comments regarding security and basic trust. It is important for mentors to ask themselves to consider what supports they found useful as they struggled early on with the complexities of the profession, and how their own mentors facilitated their own professional growth. It is equally important that the mentor and protégé discuss the methods and supports planned or implemented for the protégé’s professional development.

Outcomes

Canter, Kessler, Odar, Aylward, & Roberts (2012) recently published results from an interesting qualitative survey of frequently named mentors in pediatric psychology. The primary aim of this report was to discover what tangible and intangible benefits pediatric psychology mentors experienced through the mentorship process. Among the tangible benefits listed by mentors was the opportunity to learn or improve their own skills in an area, help with research-related tasks, presentation of completed research, and improvements or growth in the department or program. Intangible benefits of the mentorship relationship to the mentor included the professional development or growth of the protégé, growth of the field, remaining current on issues in the field, internal growth and development of the mentor, and satisfaction.

The Canter et al. (2012) survey did not assume that these benefits were the explicit motivators of becoming or being a mentor. Still, these lists provide some insight into what mentors might expect from their investments into their protégés. Mentors or prospective mentors will do well to consider their own motivations (tangible and intangible) for choosing or accepting a protégé; potential protégés might consider how their own professional development fits into the longer-term goals and objectives of potential mentors. A frank discussion of the potential and expected benefits of the mentorship relationship to each party might go a long way toward establishing, maintaining, or repairing the mentorship relationship. Such a discussion might also serve as a check for protégés’ and mentor’s expectations—downregulating or upregulating as

necessary to ensure the greatest likelihood of professional success.

Change

As noted by Levinson (1978), mentorships are, by nature, transition relationships, and as such, the protégé (especially) will have different developmental needs as time goes on. Ideally, the relationship will evolve from mentor–protégé to colleague–colleague—to the benefit of both. However, as a result of the developmental processes in both parties, changing expectations and needs can periodically pose challenges to the relationship. Levinson (1978) eloquently addressed the sometimes rocky transition periods that occur as the protégé begins gaining relative autonomy; the mentor may be offended or hurt that her/his guidance is not used as it once was, whereas the protégé may feel stifled in what seems like a prolonged adolescence. Proactive discussions about the roles played by mentor and protégé, and the expected or observed changes over time, are recommended to avoid hurt feelings or arrested development.

Benchmarking Success

Both Rosenthal and Black (2006) and Forehand (2008) have noted that very little has been written about the systematic evaluation of professional mentoring in psychology, and issued calls for greater attention to how mentorship is defined, compensated, and evaluated. These calls have gone largely unanswered in professional psychology. For many of the reasons noted earlier, it is difficult to ascribe specific components of mentorship to process variables; *what should be measured as an indicator of “good mentorship?”* My primary thesis is that it may depend, to some extent, on expectations. Ultimately, that is an empirical question that still needs to be investigated. Furthermore, choosing variables to examine as outcomes in such research seems daunting, given the number and range of potential successful outcomes of mentoring relationships. It may be that some of the emerging empirical and theoretical work in the field (e.g., Aylward et al., 2012; Berk et al., 2005; Canter et al., 2012; Johnson, 2007) will provide the impetus for further work in this area.

Until the empirical literature begins to answer some of these questions, I would encourage us as mentors to spend some time with our colleagues and protégés, considering how we individually and collectively evaluate the success of our mentorship relationships. What are our goals as mentors? What are the rewards? What are the challenges?

What is the best evidence of our success? This, perhaps, has been the most rewarding aspect of the Levin Award: To think a little more deeply about what mentorship is, what I hope to accomplish with my protégés, and how I can improve the service that I provide to students and to the profession. Beyond that, this experience has encouraged me to more clearly communicate with my students/protégés about the issues raised earlier in the text.

In his Martin P. Levin address in 2003, Drotar recommended that students give their mentors “as much feedback as possible” (p. 313) about their mentorship style and its impact. I echo this recommendation, but also expand it: Mentors, periodically ask your protégés to comment on your style of mentorship. As noted earlier in the text, I did this very thing as a means of thinking about this award. The results from my little poll were in some cases surprising, in some cases humbling, and in a few cases amusing; but in all cases helpful. I learned more about my mentorship style from my students’ and former students’ anonymous comments than I did from several professional resources on the topic. Their insights provided invaluable perspectives on my strengths and weaknesses as a mentor, and I am confident that I will be a better mentor for having asked the questions.

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