

Future Colleague or Convenient Friend: The Ethics of Mentorship

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Student mentoring is a common and often encouraged practice within graduate psychology and counseling programs. Although both mentors and protégés typically report multiple benefits from the practice, the mentoring relationship is also subject to a variety of ethical issues. The author presents a brief overview of professional literature regarding mentoring relationships, including key features and stages of development of these relationships, and then addresses potential ethical concerns. Guidelines and implications for ethical mentoring practice are also presented to encourage more specific attention to this vital component of counselor training.

Despite the reduction of tenured positions at colleges and universities in favor of part-time instructors, task overloads and multiple competing responsibilities, emphasis on research over teaching for faculty credit, and numerous other modern changes to the professorial role within the academy, the practice of mentoring appears to be a mainstay for graduate training in counseling. In a recent study, more than 65% of graduate students in psychology reported having been mentored at some point during their programs (Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000). Although the number of empirical studies is limited, current research has consistently supported the value, for both students and faculty, of mentoring relationships in graduate programs, with the degree of student satisfaction exceeding 90% (R. L. Bowman, Bowman, & DeLucia, 1990; Busch, 1985; Clark et al., 2000; Luna & Cullen, 1998). Mahoney (in press) has been a strong advocate for the development of safe, nurturing, mentoring relationships, viewing these relationships as vital in the successful training of counselors.

For the protégé, the benefits of mentoring are diverse and far-reaching. These benefits may include career and professional development, networking, and enhancement of personal identity, specific coaching, field exposure, and access to challenging work (Kram, 1988; Wright & Wright, 1987). Mentors themselves also report cultivation of a range of assets, including extrinsic rewards (e.g., assistance with projects, greater productivity, increased visibility) and intrinsic benefits (e.g., generativity, personal satisfaction, validation; Johnson & Nelson, 1999).

Despite many clear benefits and individuals' personal appreciation of mentoring relationships, such relationships are also potentially open to a spectrum of ethical concerns. Almost by definition, mentoring involves the educator in a dual relationship or in multiple roles; thus, the lines between

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personal and professional contact seem to be especially vulnerable to becoming blurred (Welfel, 2002). Central components of the mentoring dyad (i.e., dual relationships and teaching or training concerns) constitute two of the most frequent categories cited in ethical infractions (Pope & Vetter, 1992). In contrast, and perhaps as a result of the close nature of these relationships, mentoring also offers the developing student a unique opportunity for the positive translation of virtues, values, and ethics of the profession. In this article, I explore dimensions of the mentoring relationship and discuss potential ethical concerns that may ensue.

Mentoring

The term *mentor* originates from the character of the same name in Homer's *Odyssey*, who served as the wise tutor and overseer of Ulysses's son, Telemachus. At one point in the tale, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, disguises herself as Mentor to lead Telemachus in his search for his father. Johnson and Nelson (1999) pointed out the relevance of this androgynous characteristic, noting that it reflects the multiple roles of contemporary mentoring.

The specifics of the mentoring relationship may vary; however, it is likely that most people would generally agree that it typically "is a personal relationship in which a more experienced (usually older) individual acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor, of a less experienced (usually younger) protégé" (Johnson & Nelson, 1999, p. 190). Through mentoring, protégés receive specific knowledge, advice, challenge, and counsel regarding how to achieve their goals. Mentors provide guidance for the development of the younger members of the profession and may eventually elect to act as advocates, sponsors, or promoters for their protégés.

Johnson and Nelson (1999) emphasized that mentoring relationships usually extend beyond professional and career support into the cultivation of a strong personal relationship. It is this dimension of interpersonal closeness that most clearly distinguishes mentoring from mere advising or guidance. The relationships often evolve slowly and can become emotionally complex, being characterized by a deep sense of concern. Theorists have suggested that ideal mentoring relationships are marked by *comprehensiveness*, in that the relationship extends beyond the reach of the academy, and *mutuality*, referring to open interchange and dialogue between the two parties (Johnson & Nelson, 1999). Research has also supported the view that students consider such comprehensiveness and mutual support as some of the most valued elements in successful mentoring (Wilde & Schau, 1991).

In studies that examined the effects of mentoring, students involved in mentoring relationships were found to be more productive in research, publication, and conference presentations (Reskin, 1979). Students have also reported improved communication skills, greater access to the political workings of professional organizations, and confidence in testing out new skills (R. L. Bowman et al., 1990). In another study, students reported that mentors typically offered

the most assistance with regard to role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, and coaching, with 90% of those surveyed stating that it was important for graduate students to have mentors (Luna & Cullen, 1998).

Kram (1988) has delineated four specific stages of the mentoring relationship. The relationship begins with a period of *initiation*, which lasts from 6 months to 1 year, wherein primary contact occurs and the agreement to mentor is solidified. *Cultivation* follows, lasting from 2 to 5 years, during which meaningful interactions increase and there is a gradual deepening of the emotional bond. As the protégé's autonomy increases, with the possibility of obtaining an appointment elsewhere, the relationship enters a period of *separation*. Finally, the mentor and protégé *redefine* their relationship in a new form because both individuals recognize that the former mentoring relationship is no longer needed.

Ethical Concerns in Mentoring

As mentioned previously in this article, the close and multifaceted nature of mentoring relationships can make them susceptible to a wide range of ethical problems. However, neither the American Psychological Association's (APA; 1992) *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* nor the American Counseling Association's (ACA; 1995) *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* offer specific guidance for the practice of mentoring. To address this oversight, Johnson and Nelson (1999) have appropriately called for the inclusion of a set of guidelines in existing ethical codes (ACA, 1995; APA, 1992) for structuring and conducting mentoring with students based on the guidelines that are currently in use for practicing psychotherapy.

One critical ethical concern emerging from the intimate nature of the mentoring relationship is that it may lead to romantic or sexual involvement between the mentor and the protégé. According to a compilation of current studies, between 15% and 17% of female graduate students reported that they had had sexual relations with a faculty member, with 33% of those cases being with a research or academic advisor (Johnson & Nelson, 1999). Another study indicated that 2% of protégés stated that their mentors had sexualized their relationships (Clark et al., 2000). One third to one half of female students who experienced these interactions considered them to be detrimental to their careers, and more than 50% felt that these interactions negatively affected their self-esteem (Kitchener, 1992). Prohibitions against these student-teacher sexual relationships are specified in the APA's *Ethical Principles* (1992; Section 1.19.b) and in the ACA's *Code of Ethics* (1995; Section F.1.c).

Regarding the closeness of the relationship, ethical problems are also prone to develop if the mentor's role becomes blurred, so that he or she is more casual friend than mentor. In such cases, students may become faculty members' confidant regarding personal concerns, or the two may begin to relate on an inappropriate personal, rather than professional, level. These types of relationships may be marked by having the student attend to personal errands or favors, drinking excessively or otherwise becoming intoxicated with the

student, multiple interactions in which no professional topics are addressed, sharing frustrations regarding colleagues, isolated one-on-one social meetings, and the like. Such a relationship may obscure the mentor's ability to accurately evaluate the protégé as well as affect the mentor's capacity to serve as a gatekeeper for the profession (Welfel, 2002). Furthermore, such relationships are marked by a significant power imbalance because the faculty member has much more influence over the student's career (Kitchener, 1992) than vice versa. Clark et al. (2000) reported that 2% of protégés indicated that their mentors had poor boundaries or became too emotionally involved with their students. Maintenance of professional boundaries is clearly specified by both the ACA's (1995; *Code of Ethics*, Section F.1.b) and the APA's (1992; *Ethical Principles*, Section 1.17) ethical codes.

Beyond the issue of mentoring relationships extending into the personal domain, there is also the specific problem of the multiple roles that the mentor plays. Mentors typically engage in a wide range of activities with their protégés, including teaching, supervision, research, publishing, presentations, and socializing at conferences or other professional functions. Of course, although neither role is independently problematic, the extensive overlap of roles may lead to confusion and open the door for other problems such as the two mentioned previously. Because of this concern, some educators have developed what Lloyd (1992) has called a "dual-relationship phobia," which has the potential to sacrifice the many positive aspects of mentoring. Although both ethical codes (ACA, 1995, Section A.6; APA, 1992, Section 1.17) discourage dual relationships, avoiding them would be very difficult to strictly observe in any conventional mentoring situation. Rather than inherently considering such relationships unethical or rejecting them outright, V. E. Bowman, Hatley, and Bowman (1995) have instead suggested that careful attention be given to the ethical behavior of the participants within each of their multiple roles.

Counselor preparation programs should strive to provide equal access to mentoring. This can be difficult, considering the complexity involved in the development of the mentoring relationship and the ambiguity of selection requirements for both parties. In addition, attempts to directly assign mentors to students generally have been found to be unsuccessful (Johnson & Nelson, 1999). Given the many personal and professional benefits that are afforded by mentoring, care should be taken to ensure that all groups are guaranteed equal opportunity to participate, thus aligning with the ACA (1995, Section A.2) and the APA (1992, Section 1.10) prohibitions against discrimination of any kind.

Another, albeit significantly unacknowledged, concern is the educator's actual competence to mentor. Newly appointed faculty members may engage in mentoring without understanding the potential pitfalls of multiple relationships with students or the role of confidentiality in student-teacher communication. It is rare for mentoring to be a component of evaluation and promotion of new faculty, and there appear to be few, if any, specific attempts to convey this skill successfully to neophyte instructors (Johnson & Nelson, 1999). Although not specifically addressing the practice of mentoring, the ethical codes clearly emphasize working within the boundaries of one's competence (ACA, 1995, Section C.2.a; APA, 1992, Section 1.04).

Given the potential ethical complexities of the mentoring relationship, Welfel (2002) has proposed guidelines for maintaining clear boundaries and encouraging ethical practice between mentors and protégés. Her suggestions include the following:

1. Refrain from using the protégé as a confidant about personal matters or about matters of frustration with colleagues.
2. Ensure that most of the mentor's and the protégé's time spent together focuses on professional rather than on personal issues.
3. Decline repeated one-on-one social engagements in favor of group events.
4. Setting limits to exploring personal stresses or dilemmas the student experiences or referring student to other counseling when necessary.
5. Refrain from mentoring students with whom one has had a prior personal relationship.
6. Clarify parameters of the mentoring relationship at the onset of the relationship.
7. Ensure that mentoring relationships are available to all qualified students, with special attention given to minorities or other underrepresented groups.
8. Consult with colleagues about mentoring relationships to address any potential problems and to receive feedback.
9. Allow students who wish to withdraw from a mentoring relationship to do so freely and without retribution.

Conclusion

The practice of mentoring is an intricate, personal process that offers many positive benefits for both mentors and protégés. Successful mentoring can lead to greater self-confidence, understanding, guidance, as well as considerable academic and professional achievement. However, the many positive opportunities of these relationships should be balanced with a clear concern regarding the many ethical infractions that may ensue. Mentors and protégés should pay careful attention to the nature of their relationship and any indications that personal and professional beneficence is becoming obscured. In this article, I have attempted to illustrate some of these potential problems as well as present Welfel's (2002) criteria for ethical mentoring practice. Counselors, counselor educators, supervisors, and other mental health professionals would be well served to mindfully consider cultivating mentoring relationships and joining their protégés in carefully monitoring dual relationships, professional boundaries, and other important ethical issues addressed here and elsewhere in professional literature.

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