Ethical Issues in Mentoring Relationships

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Mentorship is a combination of Strategy and Character

IF YOU MUST BE WITHOUT ONE, BE WITHOUT STRATEGY

(THANK YOU STORM’N NORMAN)
Mentoring Relationships are Complex, Fluid, and sometimes, Dysfunctional

THE MENTOR RELATIONSHIP IS ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX AND DEVELOPMENTALLY IMPORTANT A [PERSON] CAN HAVE IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

DANIEL LEVINSON ET AL. (1978)

RELATIONAL LIFE CAN BE NASTY, BRUTISH, AND SHORT

STEVE DUCK (1994)
Qualities and Components of Mentorships that Heighten the Risk for Ethical Quandaries
Qualities and Components....

- Long in duration, sometimes, in perpetuity...
- Gradually more reciprocal, bonded, and intimate.
- Informal mentorships driven by “chemistry.”
- Mentor (often) holds power relative to the mentee.
- Involve numerous, overlapping roles.
- Always evolving...
Mentoring = a quality not a category

Johnson (2014)

Mentoring Relationship Continuum Model

Degree of Mentoring

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<tr>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Higher</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
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<td>Supervisor</td>
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<td>Faculty Sponsor</td>
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Relational Mentoring

Transactional → Transformational

Tentative Working Alliance → Strong Working Alliance

Low Social Support → High Social Support
Does Everyone **Deserve** or **Require** a Mentor?
WHAT ARE THE MOST PREVALENT ETHICAL TENSIONS IN DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH MENTEES?
#1: Level of Relationship Formality

- Formality = variations in visibility, focus, and duration. (chemistry, proximity, frequency)
- Informal/Organic relationships = more robust benefits.
- Informed Consent???
  - Appropriate information about expectations, potential benefits, and potential risks
“The habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and the community served” (Epstein & Hundert, 2002, p. 226).
A graduate student in her fifth year of doctoral training files an ethics complaint with a university ethics committee claiming that her dissertation chair and advisor, Dr. Porous, abandoned her, leaving her emotionally distressed. It appears the two developed an unusual level of attachment due to frequent socializing and development of a personal relationship that many at the university described as “intense.” The student had several life crises and emotional problems during her training and Dr. Porous would frequently provide what amounted to “psychotherapy sessions” that were as frequent as three to four times a week. He encouraged her to contact him by phone after hours and often invited her along to events with his family. The student became quite distressed when, on her graduation, Dr. Porous attempted to terminate the mentorship.
#2 Competence in the Mentor Role

- APA (2010): Only "practice" within the clear boundaries of competence.
- Few Mentors "trained."
- Some people lack key virtues, traits, & skills
- Some people manifest low E.Q. or toxic personality features.
Mentor Competence
(Integrated Deep Structure)

ABILITIES
Cognitive
intellectual skill
values complexity
Emotional
emotional balance
personality adjustment
Relational
capacity for intimacy
communication skill

COMPETENCIES
Student development
Relational phases
Relationship structure
Mentor functions
Boundary maintenance
Recognition of dysfunction
Cross-Cultural skills
Gatekeeping
Respect for autonomy
Self-awareness

VIRTUES
Integrity Caring Prudence

Triangular Model (Johnson, 2003)
Why Competence is Perishable

- Competence IS:
  - Fluid
  - Contextual
  - Vulnerable
- Half-Life of Education
- Compassion Fatigue
- Vicarious Trauma
- Burnout
- Life’s Tribulations
- Illness
- Cognitive Decline
An clinical supervisor for a generation of interns, Dr. Midlife began to notice a concerning trend in his relationships with trainees. Specifically, he noted that during the past year, two female supervisees had switched to other supervisors. Dr. Midlife was concerned both by the trend and by the fact that neither supervisee had spoken to him about any problems. Dr. Midlife had gone through a divorce 2 years prior, had lost interest in his own scholarship and clinical work, had begun to abuse alcohol and spend less time at work, and truth be told, had begun to rely on his female supervisees to meet some powerful needs for affirmation. Although he had not noticed the incremental decline in his professionalism with trainees, he now admitted that he was both lonely and depressed. Excruciatingly aware of the signs of his own aging, he was desperate not to be regarded as a “has-been” either personally or professionally.
#3 Advocacy vs Evaluation
Case Vignette

- A much-admired advocate for her students, Dr. Avoid had a strong track record of getting her graduate students through to graduation and on to good jobs in the field. Unflinching when called on to protect and promote her mentees, she had garnered a reputation as a formidable champion for those she mentored. When one of her students, Allison, began to show signs of both serious personality disturbance and unethical behavior, Dr. Avoid downplayed concerns expressed by colleagues and even some external clinical supervisors. Although she mentioned the concerns to Allison, she colluded with her student in construing the complaints as misunderstanding and hostility. Dr. Avoid successfully fought efforts by the clinical training director to have Allison placed on probation and wrote her stellar letters of recommendation for internships—entirely neglecting mention of the complaints made about her behavior over the years.
#3 Advocacy vs Evaluation

- Good mentorships become more mutual, reciprocal, relational, and intimate over time.
- Mentors feel compelled to offer more advocacy, protection, and collegial friendship over time.
- **But....**
  - Mentors must sometimes provide high-stakes summative assessments of performance (graduation, tenure, promotion) (APA, 2010)
  - Some mentors must simultaneously screen trainees on behalf of a profession and the public.
Letters of Recommendation?

- Thin line between advocacy and dishonesty
- Many of us admit routinely inflating letters (and omitting negatives) for well-liked trainees [Tabachnick et al., 1991]
- Internship & Residency supervisors report little correlation between letters and performance [Grote et al., 2001]
#4 Confidentiality? Privacy?

- **Confidentiality?**
  - Central to professionalism
  - Linked to trust & respect
  - An Ethical Standard

- **If mentorship is a Safe Space**, mentees share personal concerns.

- **Privacy**: A commitment to protecting mentee disclosures as a way of promoting mentee best interests.
#5 Intimacy, Attraction, Sexual Feelings

- **Relational Mentoring** = increasing levels of mutuality, intimacy, emotional depth.
- **Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love**: Intimacy + Commitment = *Companionate Love?*
- 93% of Male and 64% of Female Professors admit sexual feelings re. students
  - Tabachnick et al. (1991)
#6 To Disclose or Not to Disclose

- Bolsters role modeling, builds confidence, alleviates anxiety, provides poignant teaching, strengthens mutuality, communicates caring.
- Demands prudence, judgement, and boundaries.
- In the hands of a seasoned and judicious mentor = priceless
I'm not wearing underwear.
#7 Multiple Roles

- In general: Avoid MRs if they could diminish your objectivity, or the competent performance of your job.
- In many mentorships, MRs are ubiquitous!
  - Teacher, research supervisor, advisor, evaluator, friend.
- Is this a boundary violation? (exploitation)
Trainees Prefer Mutuality/Collegiality

- Empirical evidence suggests that students are most satisfied with training relationships characterized by:
  - Emotional support
  - Mutuality
  - Collegial friendship
  - Some degree of reciprocal disclosure
Something New

- When a mentee “friends”....
#8 Equal Access by Diverse Mentees

- Do all prospective mentees in your work context have equal access to you as a mentor?
- Do your mentees all look the same? Why???
- How’s your cultural humility?
Cultural Considerations

- Do Cross-Race, Cross-Ethnicity, Cross-Gender, Cross-Sexual Orientation relationships work?
- Can majority trainers mentor minority-group trainees?
- Discuss differences? (Thomas, 1993)
  - Direct engagement?
  - Denial and Suppression?
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Cultural Competence</th>
<th>Cultural Humility</th>
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<td>• Focus on achieving culture-specific attitudes, knowledge, and skills</td>
<td>• maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented; sensitive to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the mentee</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Assumes competence is achievable.</td>
<td>o Emphasis on self-humility, reflection, and learning</td>
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<td>o Frames culture as monolithic.</td>
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Should You Call Yourself a Mentor??

- Claiming mentor status with a mentee from a non-dominant group may invoke power, privilege, even ownership.
- Always let your trainee label the relationship.
- Brown & Ostrove (2013)
  - Genuine allies are committed to (1) expressing as little prejudice as possible and (2) addressing social inequality.
#9 The Temptation to Clone
Guiding Ethical Principles

• Beneficence:
  ○ Promote mentees’ best interests whenever possible.

• Nonmaleficence:
  ○ Avoid harm to mentees (neglect, abandonment, exploitation, boundary violations)

• Autonomy:
  ○ Work to strengthen mentee independence and maturity.
Guiding Ethical Principles

• Fidelity:
  ○ Keep promises and remain loyal to those you mentor.

• Justice:
  ○ Ensure fair and equitable treatment of all mentees (regardless of cultural differences)

• Transparency:
  ○ Encourage transparency and open communication regarding expectations
Guiding Ethical Principles

- **Boundaries:**
  - Avoid potentially harmful multiple roles with mentees and discuss overlapping roles to minimize risk for exploitation or bad outcomes.

- **Privacy:**
  - Protect information shared in confidence by a mentee. Discuss all exceptions to Privacy.

- **Competence:**
  - Establish and continue developing competence.
A new assistant professor, William was delighted when a mentorship developed between himself and Dr. Reason, a senior professor in the philosophy department. Their relationship was productive and effective for 2 years. At that point, William published an article in the top journal in the field, an article that challenged and refuted some of Dr. Reason’s earlier work. Dr. Reason became enraged—feeling betrayed by her mentee and perhaps more than a little jealous (she had never had a piece accepted in this journal). Dr. Reason became cool, aloof, and withdrawn. William was both surprised and angered by this reaction. The mentorship ended suddenly and was never discussed further by either party.
FINAL QUESTIONS?
PARTING THOUGHTS?