Special Feature: On Mentoring – *peer-reviewed*
Edited by David Stark
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/20369

Sociologica. V.18 N.3 (2024)
ISSN 1971-8853
https://sociologica.unibo.it/

Some Personal Reflections on the "Mentorship Paradox"

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Submitted: September 20, 2024 – Accepted: November 20, 2024 – Published: January 22, 2025

Abstract

I draw on my experiences of mentorship to reflect on a paradox that whilst bureaucratic organizations (such as universities) need effective mentorship to nurture new generations of scholars, the most valued kinds of mentorship necessarily run orthogonal to formalized management structures. I reflect on how mentorship is necessarily an affective and caring relationship which thereby poses risks and challenges, but also offers the possibility of enhancing academic professional standards in general.

Keywords: Mentorship; universities; elitism.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to various mentees and students who have offered me their thoughts and comments on earlier drafts of this article, many of which I have taken to heart.

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When David Stark approached me to contribute to this discussion on mentoring, he did so through flattery. "I know from some of your former students that you are an extraordinary mentor and so I would be very honored if you could accept my invitation". Of course, such personal charm may be intended to steer me towards accepting. I didn't take the flattery at face value. (I am well acquainted with the need to use personal charm to encourage "busy people" to take commitments on). But I was intrigued by his overture. Before his email arrived, I had never thought systematically as to what my specific approach to mentoring was, or what the difference between good and bad mentoring might entail. Though I had thought a great deal about the "tacit assumptions" of mentoring, and especially what kind of good advice I should give to various colleagues who I had, at one time or another, mentored (whether formally or informally). And I also obtained a great deal of pleasure from the feeling of being valued that mentorship can bring, and from seeing mentees "succeed" in various ways. This made me realize that, especially in recent years, I actually put a great deal of store on being a mentor and it might be interesting to reflect more fully on what this role entails.

The fact that I have never previously thought in formal terms about my mentorship practice itself speaks to what might be termed the "mentorship paradox". Like all complex bureaucratic and administrative systems, and compounded by the infrastructures of cultural and economic power and privilege that academic institutions particularly convey, mentorship is surely ever more important for offering focused advice and support to junior colleagues who seek their way in an alien and often intimidating environment. This is likely to be of particular value for those who are not versed in the academic habitus through having prior family or social connections. Such "outsiders", with no prior acquaintanceship with academic cultures, the kind of people who Bourdieusian scholars see as "fish out of water" might especially benefit from the tailored and personal advice that mentorship bestows, and indeed the relationship of care that is bound up with it. In these terms, mentorship can be an important part of campaigns to support gender, racial and class equity, assisting those entering academia from outside positions of privilege to gain personalized support.

This attractive view sees mentorship as a strategy to provide channels of support that might act as a counterweight to the way that academic "insiders" are able to call on the advice of their family or acquaintanceship networks in knowing how to navigate academia. Good mentorship allows those without the possibility of "phoning uncle for advice" to have alternative people to sound out, and so permit challenges to the "class ceiling" (Friedman & Laurison, 2019), not to mention the gender and racialized ceilings that are all too apparent. Such optimistic perspectives should, however, be treated with a degree of caution. I suspect that a more pessimistic Bourdieusian view might be more plausible. This would run that, since invoking effective mentorship by junior colleagues often requires the kind of social confidence that normally goes alongside the possession of economic and cultural capital (e.g. along the lines that Jack (2019) discusses in his reflections on which kind of students feel empowered to take advantage of the "office hours" that academics hold), it is likely that those mentees with the social skill to strike up good relations with their mentors tend to also come from privileged backgrounds. And similarly, mentors may be more likely to feel a rapport with mentees who are versions of their younger selves, so sustaining the kind of exclusive relations of homophily that are amply discussed in classic studies of organizations (such as Kanter, 1993, or Rivera, 2015). From this more pessimistic point of view, perhaps mentorship facilitates "elite circulation" rather than a more systematic redressing of inequality?

I am not in a position to adjudicate between these two perspectives here — it would require a substantial empirical project to do this. But I do want to reflect on the possibly subversive

role of mentorship by reflecting on what I will call the "mentorship paradox". Whilst being an essential feature of the contemporary university, it strikes me that mentorship can only be effective when it stands orthogonal to — and possibly in tension with — the power structures of the very institutions that seek to promote effective mentorship. Since 2012, I have worked at the London School of Economics (LSE), whose own guidance on mentorship towards early career staff makes this very clear. Mentors are specifically distinguished from line managers, with mentors having no formal role in any kind of career development or review process which needs to be conducted by Heads of Department and the like. The idea is that mentees can turn to their mentors as senior colleagues with whom they can discuss issues which bother and concern them on a confidential basis, and without feeling that there is any danger that these discussions will feed back into subsequent management decision making. I expect that a similar motivation lay behind the LSE's decision to rename undergraduate and postgraduate student "mentors" as "advisors" a few years ago. In purely formal terms then, the LSE distinguishes mentorship from day-to-day management. It has no way of assessing whether mentorship is being done well, placing it entirely on the interstices of its operations.

I have found this idea that there needs to be a separation between formal and informal structures an interesting provocation, and one which of course resonates with Weber's sociological perspectives on bureaucracy. In reflecting on their implications, a number of follow-up points emerge.

Firstly, and as a reflection on David's initial invitation to me, LSE's approach to mentorship requires it be distinguished from doctoral supervision itself, for which formal reporting requirements are necessarily involved. Actually, I think that distinguishing between doctoral supervision and broader mentorship relations can be useful. Having supervised around forty doctoral students to successful completion during my career, I am aware that in some cases, discussion rarely goes beyond highly focused feedback and advice on the students' projects and specific advice (such as how to prepare for job applications). Whereas in other cases it extends to far more open-ended discussions on students' feelings and emotions, relationships with colleagues and peers, academia more broadly, and including the disclosure of (sometimes heartfelt) personal and political feelings. In recognizing this variability, I have tried to follow the lead set by students themselves as to what kind of supervisory relationship works best for them. But it is only in the latter case that I would see the supervisory role also invoking mentorship, and perhaps it is best to see this as an additional, and separate, responsibility. I would also add that it does not strike me that a purely formal supervisory role, without mentorship, necessarily holds students back. I have supervised several students who I do not feel I have actively mentored who have gone on to enjoy successful academic careers, and they do not seem to have suffered because of this. (Of course, it is also possible that if they were asked, they might feel that I did mentor them — which also speaks to the informal and at times opaque nature of mentoring itself).

Nonetheless, my claim is that one can be a good and effective doctoral supervisor without being a mentor, and indeed it might be important to distinguish these two roles even when both are being performed by the same person. Effective supervision requires basic work-related academic competences: being responsive and available for regular meetings; communicating clearly and directly; giving prompt written feedback on drafts; providing informed and formal advice about expectations, requirements, work plans, etc. These kind of basic work competences should not be conflated with a broader mentorship relationship. Indeed, perhaps there might be a danger that they can be a short cut where a broader "mentorship" relationship is invoked, as if a good "personal" relationship can stand in for the basics of diligent supervisory

work. It is not an uncommon experience for me to hear from doctoral students that they feel they have a good personal relationship with a supervisor, and yet for them to also feel that they are not getting the kind of focused feedback and advice that they need to flourish.

This point is to highlight — and endorse — the assumption underpinning the LSE's official guidance that mentorship is most effective when sensitive and confidential issues can be discussed which lie outside formal working relationships as such. It follows from this that attempts to formally specify what mentorship involves would actually call into question the value of the relationship itself. This implication is that effective mentorship can only persist when both parties actively want it to continue, i.e. they value — and hopefully even enjoy — talking in a confidential and discrete way with each other. To put this even more directly, effective mentorship is necessarily a personal, even "affective", relationship. And like other personal relationships, it cannot readily be boiled down to formal expectations, such as the frequency and duration of meetings, and a checklist of items that one is expected to cover.

It is in this way that I see the mentorship relationship being paradoxical, in that it is both simultaneously vital for the humane, professional, and positive working relations in offering vital support to emerging scholars, and yet also its terms cannot be codified and bureaucratized without damaging the terms of the relationship itself. It hardly needs saying that this affective aspect necessarily poses its own challenges, with the possibility of the relationship becoming sour or even abusive. Mentorship is a personal relationship which is also hierarchical and unequal, and therefore poses necessary risks, the management of which requires skill, integrity and responsibility. Mentorship needs informality, yet this informality also makes it a vulnerable and unequal relationship.

In making this point, it seems to me that the most valuable mentorship experiences are when mentees spontaneously wish to share information — especially on sensitive subjects in which the mentee feels personally exposed: "I got my article rejected! Is this fair?". "I failed in yet another job interview! What am I doing wrong?". "Once again, academic X was rude and dismissive! How can I deal with this person?". From the mentor's point of view, the equivalent spontaneous gut feelings might be to want to immediately pass on information about job vacancies, insights as to why academic X is routinely patronizing, and so on. But feeling comfortable with each other, so that one is able and willing to have these kinds of sensitive discussions cannot be conjured up by organizational fiat, they depend on the development of a rapport, the existence of which depends on a myriad of factors, including the personalities of both mentors and mentees. There can be a sense, I fear, of superiority amongst some more senior academics wherein opinions are heard and valued differently dependent on their position within the institution or field. I am more of the view that everyone brings something equally important to the table and I try to do my best to create a level playing field and some kind of safe space for sensitive discussions.

My sense of when I have been most helpful to mentees is on those occasions — which sadly are pretty common — when mentees wish to discuss whether they have been unfairly treated in one way or another, and sometimes if they should pursue a formal complaint. In such situations I try to make a point of being supportive, and hopefully have never denigrated or doubted the feelings that mentees convey (along the lines of, "well, you shouldn't really feel like this — you need to understand how academia operates"). The perceived feelings of mentees, whatever they are, need to be given utmost and paramount respect. In recent years, as I have thought more about this, I have tried to make it clear that ultimately the decision whether to pursue complaints must be for the mentee alone (something along the line of "I am neither encouraging you nor discouraging you from complaining, but perhaps I can assist you in making up

your mind by reflecting on x, y, z with you"). Especially when the potential complaint is directed at an immediate colleague, there is the possibility of a conflict of interest. Here, I think it is vital that a good mentor sides with their mentees, rather than colleagues, their academic employer or some other kind of authority (such as might be justified along the lines of defending the need to preserve some kind of "professional confidentiality"). In response to prompting from mentees, I thus have shared my perceptions of colleagues' personal behaviors and actions, including where I have concerns about these, on a confidential basis with the strict instruction that these are not to be shared (once again, testifying to the personal nature of mentorship which depends on trust and confidences between both parties being fully respected). There is clearly a subtle boundary here. It would be damaging if I were to offer casual comments on the behavior of colleagues who I may not like, where this goes beyond the focus of the mentee's own concerns. But I am also mindful that it can be useful to tell mentees, that from my experience colleague Y can or cannot be trusted to take concerns seriously, i.e. to offer informal advice as to who can be relied upon. Treading this careful path, I actually don't feel disloyal to senior colleagues: I expect that if other mentors and mentees similarly reflect on my own practices in their conversations, and such discussions lead to informal or even formal meetings alerting me to the need to improve, then this is surely something to be welcomed (however personally upsetting this might be in the immediate short term).

I have therefore come to the view that rather than these discussions violating professional boundaries, they are actually essential so that acceptable norms and practices can ultimately be strengthened through building awareness of what the boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable should reasonably be. These kinds of discussions can also support "whistleblowing" and the exposure of abusive behavior, which is absolutely necessary if academic life is to be conducted on just and equitable lines. Once again, this testifies to how important mentorship is, not only in supporting early career staff, but more widely in ensuring academia is a genuinely healthy environment.

Following from this, one of the major difficulties to navigate is that although mentorship is necessarily a personal relationship, it needs to be distinguished from more expansive forms of friendship. Yet, clearly this is not straightforward to differentiate. Building up the kind of personal rapport that underpins, mentorship generally involves sharing some personal life details, talking about your health and feelings, your families and friends, so that one feels you "know" and trust the other person. It also seems reasonable that the most productive discussions might take place in an informal environment away from the office, where both parties can feel they are outside the academic environment so that they can better reflect on it from a safe space. Perhaps the key distinction to observe, recognizing the hierarchical nature of the mentoring relationship, is that it is inappropriate for the mentor to actively seek support from the mentee (in the way that both parties to friendship relations may feel that they are empowered to seek support from each other in challenging times), and that the mentee needs to initially set the terms and boundaries around which the frame of discussion takes place. This is somewhat akin to the organization of therapeutic relationships.

The paradox of mentorship draws attention to the tortuous relationship between institutions and individuals. As social scientists, we are particularly attuned to how inequalities persist, but we also need to be attuned to how they function in our own everyday environments and do what we can to mediate against this. For all my reservations, I maintain the optimistic view that mentoring can offer such an opportunity to help provide "insider knowledge" to a complex institution and provide solidarity to those learning to navigate the field.

In these brief comments I have tried to reflect on how mentorship is both absolutely neces-

sary, and yet also runs orthogonal to the operations of contemporary academia. In this respect, they might be seen as a contradiction which lies at the heart of a neo-liberal managed academia. There is little or no incentive for senior academics to pursue good mentorship in the highly strategic and goal-oriented culture of the contemporary university: by definition (or at least, by the definitions I have championed here), good mentorship cannot be calibrated or formally weighed up in a way which allows it to be used as some kind of metric for career advance. And yet, for all the thrill one obtains from the kudos of publishing a good article or winning a grant, perhaps when relaxing in the evening it is ultimately the pleasure of seeing someone you are interested in, and care about, fulfilling their potential that is the biggest reward of all?

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