Mentoring Relationships in Academe: Fostering Engagement through Connection

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What elements are critical in fostering the engagement of two individuals in a mentoring relationship? Based on this phenomenological research on the mentoring experiences of women faculty, a feeling of connection emerged as an essential attribute of these relationships. The findings suggest that HRD professionals should be engaged in providing opportunities for protégés and mentors to develop their own connections to best facilitate the establishment of mentoring relationships in academic institutions.

Keywords: Mentoring, Career Development, Women Faculty

There has been much support in the literature for the positive outcomes that are likely to accrue as a result of being involved in a mentoring relationship. Mentoring has been proposed in higher education to enhance orientation, socialization, and career outcomes of faculty and, specific to women faculty, to facilitate increased equity (Boyle & Boyce, 1998; Boice, 1993; Brennan, 2000; Johnston & McCormack, 1997; Quinlan, 1999; Roland & Fontanesi-Seime, 1996; Smith, Smith & Markham, 2000). Mentoring has also been suggested as a strategy to acclimate new teachers to the classroom environment, and to explicate practical knowledge (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney, & O'Brien, 1995; Ballantyne, Hansford, & Parker, 1995; Zanting, Verloop & Vermunt, 2003).

Given the proliferation of mentoring, it is important to learn what attributes of these relationships facilitates the likelihood of a mentoring relationship occurring between two parties. This paper focuses on a key finding of a phenomenological research study on the experience of being mentored for women faculty that described a *feeling of connection* as an essential attribute of their mentoring relationships. The supporting sub-themes provide guidance to HRD professionals who seek to foster the establishment of mentoring relationships in organizations.

Conceptual Framework

Previous studies have suggested that that there are a number of factors that are likely to influence the engagement of two individuals in a mentoring relationship. These factors include personal and situational characteristics affecting both the mentor and the protégé (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Kram, 1983, 1985). Individual characteristics of the mentor associated with willingness to mentor include altruism, positive affectivity, and prior experience with mentoring, while situational factors include the organizational reward systems and opportunities for interaction on the job (Aryee, Chay, & Chew, 1996; Ragins & Cotton, 1993). Personal characteristics of the protégé that were attractive to the mentor include the past performance of the protégé, in that mentors anticipated greater rewards as a result of engaging in career-enhancing behaviors (Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993). On the other hand, protégés were attracted to mentors who were interpersonally competent and integrated into the decision-making of the organization, while those protégés who initiated mentoring relationships tended to have a high internal locus of control, high self-monitoring, and high emotional stability (Olian, Carroll, Giannantonio, & Ferren, 1988; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). In addition, Fagenson (1992) found significant differences in protégés' needs for power and achievement versus non-protégés.

Chao, Walz, and Gardner (1992) determined that similarity of goals often encouraged two parties to initiate an informal mentoring relationship while formal protégés did not indicate this to be a factor. Specific to academic relationships, there is some indication that mutual interests play a role in the establishment of these relationships, in that mentors were noted to be more likely to sponsor those protégés whose careers paralleled their own and where there was similarity of mentor and protégé in terms of race, social class, educational level, and professional field (Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1981; Eastman & Williams, 1993). Wanberg, Welsh, and Hezlett (2003) also reported that protégé perceptions of similarity were positively associated with mentoring functions in a number of studies, yet one study found a lower correlation between mentors and protégés perceptions of similarity. Based on these differing results, these authors proposed that clarification of the dimensions that affect perceptions of similarity would be valuable. Given the recent proliferation of teacher mentoring programs, Abell et al.'s (1995)

qualitative study of 29 mentors and interns is of particular note in its attempt to illuminate teacher/intern relationships. Findings indicated that interns and mentors jointly constructed their relationships and the most productive mentor/intern relationships were supported by the trust and respect that both individuals had for each other. The mentors' assuming a helping versus an evaluation role was also noted to be important, as well as the mentors' ability to adapt their role based on the interns' needs.

In addition, research on gender preferences in mentoring has found no preference for same-gender mentors among either male or female respondents and no gender effects with respect to initiation of mentoring (Olian et al., 1988; Turban & Dougherty, 1994). Even when controlling for differences in factors related to decisions to mentor such as age, rank, tenure and mentorship experience, Ragins and Cotton (1993) found that women expressed a similar willingness to mentor as did men, even though they anticipated more potential drawbacks to becoming a mentor in an organization. However, the role modeling function and public image of cross-gender relationships have been expressed as potential concerns (Burke & McKeen, 1995; Kram, 1985; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Ragins (1999) noted that research on gender and mentoring relationships has only been conducted over the past decade and has, in some cases, yielded mixed results. We have limited knowledge of the factors that affect the decision to mentor and as to whether gender has an impact on these factors (Ragins, 1999).

Similarly, Wanberg, Welsh, and Hezlett (2003), in conducting a comprehensive review of the mentoring literature, noted that there has been relatively modest attention paid within the mentoring literature to the influence of individual characteristics other than race and gender. Some research has found that personality traits such as negative affectivity, extraversion, self-monitoring, Type A personality, and self-esteem account for differences in initiation of mentoring behaviors. Among other gaps, the need for additional research on whether proactive individuals receive more mentoring and on how specific mentor knowledge, skills and abilities affect mentors' attractiveness and effectiveness was identified (Wanberg, Welch, & Hezlett, 2003).

Noe, Greenberger, and Wang (2002) also suggested that, despite agreement that mentoring is beneficial for protégés, there is an inherent complexity in the nature of relationships that are termed as mentoring. These authors recommended that additional qualitative research be conducted as a means of identifying, through rich, thick descriptions from participants in these relationships, various aspects of mentoring relationships. Based on the complexity of variables that have been identified in studies and previous reviews on mentoring, gaining a deeper understanding of the essential attributes of mentoring relationships would be of high value to our understanding of what is critical to the establishment of these relationships. Phenomenological research, which embraces the complexity and wholeness of the human experience, is particularly applicable to studying this phenomenon (Gibson & Hanes, 2003).

Description of the Study

The results reported here are part of a larger phenomenological study (see Gibson, 2004) on the experiences of being mentored for women faculty. This study explored women faculty's mentoring experiences across the variety of mentoring that they had experienced in their academic careers, in an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the essential nature of this experience. The mentoring relationships experienced were formal or informal, with faculty members or administrators, and with male or female mentors at the same or varying ranks. The key criterion in the choice of these participants was their assertion that they had experienced being mentored as a faculty member. Based on these criteria, nine full-time women faculty members in baccalaureate-granting institutions and above were selected for this study. All participants were currently working at universities located in the Midwest U.S.A. Participants included three individuals with the rank of full professor; two Associate Professors; three Assistant Professors; and one Instructor. These individuals were between 37 and 53 years of age at the time of the interviews and had between one to 22 years of faculty experience. Their fields of study represented a cross-section of disciplines, including business, education, behavioral sciences, health science, social sciences and life sciences.

The purpose of this research was to gain a deep understanding of the nature and meaning of the experience of being mentored for these women faculty; therefore, the use of phenomenological research methodology was most appropriate for this study. The research question was as follows: What is the experience of being mentored like for women faculty? Conversational interviewing was the primary method used to gather the rich descriptions of mentoring from each faculty member. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes and questions were generated that focused specifically on the participant's experiences of being mentored, staying as close as possible to the experience as it was lived. Strategies employed to remain open to the phenomenon were congruent with the lifeworld research concepts of openness, encounter, immediacy, uniqueness, and meaning (for further information, see Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001; Dahlberg & Drew, 1997). In addition, throughout the research process, researcher assumptions were surfaced and then set aside (bracketed) to reduce their influence on the study.

Interviews with each participant were transcribed and analyzed using the selective reading approach (van Manen, 1997), which involved identifying key statements that seemed especially revealing about the phenomenon as it was described. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of participant responses. The interview transcripts were analyzed using a 'whole/parts/whole' method of analysis—the entire transcript was read for a holistic understanding, the parts were then analyzed for themes; and then these themes were related back to the whole of the experience. This analysis process was supported by actual statements from the participants. In addition, preliminary themes were sent to the participants who were asked to review and to specifically identify those statements in which they felt that their anonymity might be compromised, so that these could be modified or removed.

From this analytic process, five essential themes of the experience of being mentored for women faculty emerged. These themes are (1) Having someone who truly cares and acts in one's best interest; (2) A feeling of connection; (3) Being affirmed of one's worth; (4) Not being alone; and (5) Politics are part of one's experience (Gibson, 2004). This article specifically focuses on the theme "A Feeling of Connection," explicating one of the essential attributes that needs to be in place in establishing and maintaining these relationships. This essential theme is further described by five sub-themes, which are listed in Table I below:

Table I. *A Feeling of Connection*

Sub-themes
Mentors were valued for their expertise; they shared their experiences while expressing their humanity
Protégés were receptive to input and advice
Protégés and mentors shared common ground; a common way of understanding
The relationship was based on trust, which was firmly grounded in the value system of the mentor
By being accepted, protégés were able to accept their mentors' imperfections

A Feeling of Connection

A feeling of connection emerged as an essential theme of the experience of being mentored for women faculty. The perception that mentors had the expertise and were willing to share both their experiences and their mistakes contributed to this connection. Protégés trusted their mentors as they observed through many interactions their mentors' underlying value systems. Protégés perceived that both they and their mentors shared a common means of understanding, a common way of seeing the world. Protégés contributed to this sense of connection by their receptivity to what their mentors had to offer. The connection inherent in the relationship allowed the protégés to feel accepted and to also accept that their mentors were not perfect.

The five sub-themes, which assist in explicating this essential theme, are described in the following sections.

Mentors Were Valued for Their Expertise; They Shared Their Experiences While Expressing Their Humanity

Women faculty sought mentors whom they perceived had expertise or experiences from which they could learn. Having had more experience in a particular arena, mentors were able to provide protégés with a broad perspective on issues that they faced in their careers.

> I *also look for people [who have] ... the expertise. In other words, when I'm asking questions related to [name of mentor] in the department head position, it's because she wears that hat and I see her as having some sense of expertise. The same thing with [name of another mentor]. She's been there. So that she would have insights, where I'm going to an area that I don't know that much about.* {Laura}

In addition to having the expertise, mentors were perceived as being willing to share this knowledge.

> *He is a wonderful administrator and that was clear to me, so I learned a lot by watching him and he also was very transparent in the sense that he would be very open with me about issues coming up....He was actively training me in administrative things but he'd be very open about issues that were troubling him, issues on his mind, as appropriate....I learn a lot from people showing me in effect what the issues are. I sat in on things but he would also share what was on his mind.* {Barb}

Mentors' willingness to discuss difficulties that they had experienced in their lives contributed to the feeling of connection. Mentors shared their humanity with protégés and admitted to having made mistakes in their careers. Mentors were also noted as sharing similar concerns, even though they may have had a great deal of experience.

> *She's not had the easiest life. I think there's been some, just, real events within her past that have been extremely painful. And she has shared that also. Which is a connect. And she's not unwilling with people that she's close to, to share history and to talk about it. And that doesn't always have to happen....it's really interesting because the other [faculty teaching] mentor is very willing to share past experience. He seems real open to sharing not just things that worked, but risks he's taken and times that he's fallen. And that makes him more approachable. So, human. That sense of being human.* {Rebecca}

Protégés Were Receptive to Input and Advice

Protégés were receptive to being mentored; they were open to receiving input and advice. But more than that, protégés took this input and expanded on it to help them achieve their career goals. They thought about the advice and tried to figure out what it meant within the context of their careers. In describing the stories of their mentoring experiences, these women faculty conveyed their receptivity to the mentoring that they had received. Protégés were receptive to input generally and also receptive to specific advice given.

> *She also took the role of doing one of my teaching evaluations ... and that was useful because it was, at that point, somebody that I'd become comfortable with in this mentoring relationship and I felt like she put a lot of time into it and gave me a lot of constructive feedback, both positive and negative things. This is what you can do to really improve and I think those were really useful, really helped. I guess I just felt like there was a connection now that I was able to utilize to develop my program better.* {Sue}

Respect for one's mentor and the perception that the mentor's perspectives were credible contributed to the receptivity of the protégé.

> *I think it's mutual respect. I respect him not only as a person but as a scientist. And, you know, everybody is flawed. But it's the journey, it's what you do with the information. It's how when somebody makes you aware of it, you deal with that. I think that's what makes good human character, good scientific character. And so I think it was the mutual respect and the ability that both of us could learn through the dialog. We weren't ego defended. Just a very open dialog in our scientific field.* {Wendy}

Protégés and Mentors Shared Common Ground; A Common Way of Understanding

The mentoring relationships for women faculty were facilitated by a perception of common ground or a common way of understanding; an attraction of similar interests or ways of thinking. They were able to share their passion for what they did and respect for their work.

> *I looked to build that relationship with [mentor's name]; common research interests, common research approaches, she and I both do a lot of experimental designs in our research, common interest in what we were investigating, and also now have commonly explored other research methodologies together and incorporated that in our research projects. So, she serves as an example of that kind of person, similar, but when I would speak with her before I knew her very well, I thought we might get along. Why did I think we might get along? You know, laughed at my jokes, commiserated over the same kind of frustrations, agreed that they were challenges that we both faced.* {Laura}

The degree of the mentors' interest enabled protégés to feel a sense of comfort in this relationship. The sense of a common shared experience or a common understanding enabled the relationship to develop.

> *I think it was more a case of, perhaps, comfort than compatibility....they were the kinds of people that had an interest in what I was doing and I felt cared about me [in] some way....I felt at ease and ... I felt, somehow, that this process was good for me and was fun and that I was probably getting more out of it than they were.* {Sue}

> *I really think that the mentor is there to help you to share your passions....They've been through the experience, they've gone through the rocky road, they ... can share the excitement but in a very intimate way. And that being able to share a real passion about what you do is, to find somebody that'll understand, makes it all that much more meaningful.* {Rebecca}

The Relationship Was Based on Trust, Which Was Firmly Grounded in the Value System of the Mentor

The women faculty in this study described their mentors as being people that they could trust. Mentors were noted as having strong value systems that they lived by and communicated through their actions on a day-to-day basis. Protégés described their mentors as being people who had an overall respect for others.

> *I think it falls on her personality which is an outpouring from her belief system and her values ... in the sense that every person has worth....It's just the same way she treats students, that every concern is valid and every feeling has validity, and you sort of work through [it] together....But it's always sort of this tension and working side-by-side and moving together toward the same goal and a common shared vision. But it's the underlying belief system. It's really love. She really does love people. And some people don't.* {Rebecca}

> *[Name of mentor] had really engendered respect; even though I disagreed with her, I could respect her opinion and respect where it came from. And she had a respect for humans, period, and for what they knew, and she knew that she didn't know everything.* {Ellen}

Protégés saw evidence of these characteristics in other actions of their mentors, and in how they saw their role in the larger community, both academic and societal.

> *She does what we new faculty have been cautioned not to do. She says, "yes" a lot. If nobody will handle this particular thing, she'll take over the principalship and do whatever. People who say, "yes" a lot care....So*

she's out doing things around the area, you know, the partnerships with the schools. Things that the more senior faculty should be doing, but don't want to. {Nancy}

Protégés expressed that their mentors provided them with the assurance that what they said would be honored and treated in a confidential manner.

I suppose at the heart of most of these relationships is just feeling like you can talk to this person and they're not going to betray your ... ignorance or your frailties. {Lillian}.

Well, I think in [name of mentor's] case, we have had conversations over time that were labeled as confidential and were kept confidential. So, that's why I think I can trust her. I'd not violated that with her and she's not violated that with me. So I think that that's an important piece of it. {Laura}

By Being Accepted, Protégés Were Able to Accept Their Mentors' Imperfections

Women faculty described a feeling of being accepted in their mentoring relationships, based on an ease of knowing the mentor well. The comfort of the relationship allowed protégés to feel free to express themselves in the relationship. They also recognized that their mentors were not perfect, that they did not possess exclusive knowledge in the relationship. They accepted the mentors' imperfections, recognizing that this was a part of who they were.

We would have occasional lunches and then he'd say, 'Yeah, you know, this is kind of enjoyable' and then I said, 'Yeah, it's kind of enjoyable' ... after a few iterations, we just decided, this is kind of OK. We'd usually have lunch on a Friday, you know, Friday noontime, and so it's the end of the week and you're kind of winding down anyway and so we'd have a two hour lunch....I always looked forward to it as a nice way of relaxing; I didn't feel like I needed to be smart....I could just show up and if I was having a down day, it was no big deal....so I did really start to look forward to that and still do. {Lillian}

Although mentors were noted as sometimes providing poor advice, this did not detract from the protégés' perception of the value of this relationship, underscoring the recognition that mentors do not need to be perfect. There were attributes of the mentor that the protégé was less comfortable with, but which did not threaten the mentoring relationship, as the strength of the underlying relationship enabled the protégé to accept the mentor's imperfections.

But it's part of his sense of humor, I think. I don't know if that's just the way he deals with his female colleagues because he can't think of any other way to deal with them or not. But, that would be the only negative thing. But yet it's a positive, too, because it's like, you know, it's communication. He's being open. {Linda}

Discussion and Implications for HRD

The findings of this phenomenological research established *a feeling of connection* as essential to the experience of being mentored for women faculty. This feeling of connection between protégé and mentor needed to be present for relationships to be perceived as mentoring. As can be seen in the description of the sub-themes, the feeling of connection was based on both mentor and protégé characteristics. Key attributes that describe this connection include the following:

- Expertise of the mentor, which they were willing to share
- Common ground (i.e., based on similarity of interests) between the mentor and protégé
- A relationship built on trust
- Receptivity of the protégé

Each participant found their own means of developing this connection, incorporating the attributes of mentor expertise, common ground, trust, and receptivity. Most importantly, this essential theme was found across the variety of relationships that women faculty had experienced as mentoring in their careers. A feeling of connection was present with both male and female mentors, with peers and those senior to them in rank, and in those relationships that were developed through formal and informal means. This feeling of connection was, regardless of the structure or specific characteristics of the relationship, considered to be essential to the mentoring relationship. Therefore, one might posit that the specific characteristics of the relationship (for example, its gender composition) may be less important than whether this feeling of connection is present in the relationship.

In addition, relationships that were seen as mentoring by protégés, were not considered to be 'perfect.' Protégés clearly recognized that their mentors were unique individuals, with their own set of personality characteristics, attributes, and idiosyncrasies. However, this connection, which was further described as a feeling of being accepted, contributed to the protégé's acceptance of their mentor's imperfections. Based on this connection, protégés were able to engage in a relationship with the whole person that was their mentor.

The importance of this feeling of connection between mentor and protégé provides HRD professionals with some guidance as to the establishment of mentoring programs and practices in organizations. If mentoring is to be successful, this feeling of connection needs to be present in these relationships. So, how can one best facilitate a

connection between two parties? Based on this study, it would seem that the individual protégés and mentors would be the best ones to make this determination. The sponsorship of forums or other gatherings where potential protégés and mentors could meet each other—to determine whether this connection has the potential to develop—would likely contribute to the successful matching of two individuals in a mentoring relationship.

This is not to say that formal mentoring programs that have an external facilitator match protégés and mentors cannot be successful. This feeling of connection can be fostered between two individuals who are formally assigned in a mentoring relationship and, in fact, in a number of cases described by the participants in this study, this indeed is what occurred. However, the findings of this study support the likelihood that this connection would be enhanced by allowing participants in these relationships more opportunity to develop these connections and to make these determinations at the individual relationship level. In that way, individuals themselves could ascertain whether the elements of expertise, trust, common ground, and receptivity have the potential to be present in the relationship.

From a practice perspective, focusing on facilitating the making of connections between those who are interested in being mentored and those who have an interest in mentoring would allow these two individuals to explore areas of interest and determine whether there in sufficient "common ground" from which to pursue a continuing relationship. Instead of directly matching mentors and protégés based on certain criteria, HRD professionals could instead educate potential participants on the attributes of mentoring relationships that protégés have determined as essential to effective mentoring relationships. Once this connection is established, it is less likely that the HRD professional administering these mentoring programs would need to be involved in working through relationship issues, as the findings of this study suggest that protégés can accommodate a mentor's imperfections that might otherwise cause difficulty in the relationship if this feeling of connection is present.

From a research perspective, as we continue to see the proliferation of and research on other developmental networks in addition to mentoring (see, e.g., Higgins & Kram, 2001), it will be important to determine whether this feeling of connection is essential to other developmental relationships as well. If this is the case, then the sponsorship of gatherings, where faculty could establish a range of developmental relationships, may be the best investment of time and resources in our academic institutions. In addition, this research focused specifically on women faculty; additional investigation of the essential themes of mentoring for male faculty as well as from the perspective of the mentor, would provide valuable information as to the essential attributes that foster the establishment of these relationships for all faculty.

Finally, although this article has explored *a feeling of connection* as one of the essential themes of the experience of being mentored for women faculty, it is important to look at this finding within the context of the mentoring experience as a whole for these faculty. The results of this phenomenological study underscore the need for HRD professionals to facilitate the establishment of these connections in the academic environment, as the impact on the faculty member's career success of having been mentored was emphasized very strongly by these women faculty participants. Women faculty described these mentoring relationships as having a profound impact on their careers. As represented by Ellen, a full professor, in reflecting on her mentoring experiences over the course of her career:

> *I'm astonished when I learn that not everybody has had the kind of mentoring I've had. And, I, oh mercy, I just can't imagine it.* {Ellen}

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