Students' Views of Mentors in Psychology Graduate Training

Terry Cronan-Hillix
San Diego State University

Leah K. Gensheimer
Michigan State University

W. A. Cronan-Hillix
San Diego State University

William S. Davidson
Michigan State University

This study examined the prevalence and role of mentors in graduate training from the viewpoint of students. Ninety graduate psychology students from a large midwestern university responded to a survey about the characteristics of mentors, the roles mentors play in their professional and social lives, and why some students do not have a mentor. Over 50% of the respondents had mentors. Inability to find a satisfactory mentor was the predominant reason for not having one. Findings suggest that mentors serve supportive functions and promote professional productivity as indicated by research involvement, publications, and conference papers. Personality characteristics distinguish good from poor mentors much more frequently than do intellectual competence or professional activity.

Since ancient times, wiser and more experienced people have been expected to look out for novices. The term *mentor* has been adapted from Greek mythology to mean a wise guide, and has been incorporated into our daily language to mean adviser, teacher, or coach.

Formal distinctions have been made between the mentor relationship and that of an apprenticeship or a mere role model (Bolton, 1980). Although the ambiguity surrounding the often undefined term has been criticized (Bogat & Redner, 1984; Speizer, 1981), most definitions share common features. A mentor is an experienced adult who guides, advises, and supports inexperienced protégés for the purpose of furthering their careers.

An increased interest in mentoring is reflected in numerous papers on the topic. Phases of mentor relationships have been detailed (Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977; Kram, 1983), its importance in adult development has been stressed (Levinson, 1978), and gender-related issues have been discussed and studied (Bogat & Redner, 1984; Bolton, 1980; Goldstein, 1979; Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978).

The business world has long used mentoring to train its newcomers. Catchy titles such as "Everyone Who Makes it Has a Mentor" (Collins & Scott, 1978), "The Mentor Concept is Alive and Well" (Erickson & Pitner, 1980), and "Corporate Godfathers by Appointment Only" (Price, 1981) have appeared in business journals since the late 1970s. These writings often emphasize the value of fostering such relationships, which are thought to benefit the protégé, the mentor, and the organization (Bensahel, 1977; Johnson, 1980; Schmidt & Wolfe, 1980). Recommendations for young professionals to find mentors are plentiful (Erickson & Pitner, 1980; Rawlins & Rawlins, 1983). As Halcomb (1980) wrote, "to have a mentor is to be among the blessed. Not to have one is to be damned to eternal oblivion or at least to a mid-level status" (p. 13). Most of these essays present personal viewpoints, but little empirical work.

Roche's (1979) study of senior executives in large corporations is an exception. This survey showed that mentor relationships are common in the business world. Two-thirds of his 1,250 respondents reported having a mentor or sponsor. Most of them entered into such a relationship during the first 5 years of their careers. Executives who had mentors reached their position at a younger age, attained a higher level of education, earned a higher income, were more satisfied with their career progress, and were more likely to sponsor protégés. Some corporations have instituted formal programs to guarantee the development of mentor–protégé relationships (Price, 1981).

The business world is not the only setting that has recognized the value of mentoring. It has been used as a career guidance technique for high school and college students (Borman & Colson, 1984), has been applied to the nursing profession (Atwood, 1979), and has been recognized as an essential component in psychotherapy (Burton, 1977). The field of education has also made practical use of mentoring. Nontraditional undergraduate college programs have been based on a mentor-style model (Baack et al., 1981; Bradley, 1981), as have graduate professional training programs (Singer, 1982).

It is no surprise that academicians are taking a closer look at mentoring as a training technique. Informal mentoring has long been a practice among scholars. Throughout the disciplines there are examples of scholars facilitating the progress of the less learned. In psychology, for example,

Freud first adopted Breuer, then Fliess, as mentors, and in turn served as a mentor for Jung, Adler, Rank, Ferenczi, and Reik, among others.

The benefits associated with mentoring in academia are similar to those in the business setting. Reskin (1979) and Moore (1982) have highlighted some of these advantages. From learning scientific knowledge and technical skills to learning the ropes of the system (i.e., formal and informal "dos" and "don'ts"), the protégé can gain much from a mentor that will facilitate professional development. The protégé often uses the mentor as a role model to set personal standards of performance and codes of ethics. The protégé gains visibility within the colleague network of the mentor. With this association and exposure come a degree of status and increased professional opportunities. All of this should help to build protégés' self-confidence in their own abilities. The faculty member who takes on the mentor role also gains personal and professional rewards. A sense of vicarious satisfaction in facilitating another's accomplishments has been mentioned (Schmidt & Wolfe, 1980). The research productivity of mentors is believed to be increased through assistance provided by their protégés. The competent graduate student can free some faculty time by performing the more routine tasks that the mentor would otherwise do (Bogat & Redner, 1984). Further, mentors gain status and influence through the actions of their protégés, who often "quote them, write about them, and invite them to speak" (Halcomb, 1980, p. 18). The advantages of a mentoring relationship are obvious and reciprocal. In most contexts, however, the benefits have not been empirically validated (Speizer, 1981).

Research that examines the effects of merit (i.e., individual/personal performance) and ascriptive characteristics on success and productivity in academia has provided some empirical evidence for the association between having a mentor and success. This line of research suggests that sponsorship affects a student's predoctoral productivity (Crane, 1965; Reskin, 1979) and plays an important role in initial academic job placement (Cameron & Blackburn, 1981; Long, 1978).

Most of the empirical work in this area has been retrospective. Successful individuals have been asked to recall and discuss significant relationships that helped promote their careers (Roche, 1979). Other investigators have studied the relationship between level of success and sponsorship (e.g., Cameron & Blackburn, 1981; Reskin, 1979). To date, mentoring has not been explored at the point of occurrence; that is, from the active or potential protégé's perspective. How prevalent are mentoring relationships in graduate training? Who becomes a protégé? Are there differences between those who have a mentor and those who do not? Why do some choose to become a protégé and others do not? What are the subjective benefits associated with having a mentor when one is beginning one's professional development? Are there objective advantages associated with mentoring at this time? Does mentoring promote productivity at early stages of professional growth? Are there systematic differences between "good" and "bad" mentors? Our investigation was designed to answer these questions.

Method

Subjects

All participants were psychology graduate students enrolled at a large midwestern university during the 1983–1984 academic year. Of the 164 students initially approached, 90 (55%) returned completed questionnaires. Forty-eight were males and 42 were females. The mean age was 29.7 years, with a range of 22 to 48. Students had been in graduate school for a mean of 3.9 years. Approximately 75% of the students had a master's degree. Participants were affiliated with one of six specialized programs in the psychology department: clinical (57%), ecological (17%), developmental (9%), industrial/organizational (9%), social (6%), and experimental (3%). These proportions correspond closely to the proportions enrolled in each specialty for the year.

Measures

A 40-item questionnaire was developed by the authors to assess graduate students' involvement in, and perceptions of, mentor relationships. Students were asked whether or not they had a mentor, and about common characteristics of mentors, the roles mentors played in their professional and social lives, the qualities associated with good and poor mentors, and their experiences with mentors or other faculty members. Students who did not have a mentor responded to all questions that could be answered without having a mentor (e.g., characteristics of good and poor mentors, and productivity).

Procedure

The questionnaire, accompanied by a cover letter, was sent to all psychology graduate students. Because the experimenters concluded that the word *mentor* had a partly subjective meaning, which might vary from one individual to another, as well as from one program to another within the psychology department, respondents were allowed to interpret it as they pleased. Thus, neither the cover letter nor the questionnaire contained a definition of *mentor*. However, respondents understood that a mentor was more than an academic adviser; nearly half reported that they had no mentor, and all of them received advice from a committee in their program area.

The cover letter was signed by all of us. (At that time two of us were graduate students, one was a visiting faculty member, and the fourth was a regular faculty member.) Respondents were guaranteed anonymity by having a secretary construct a master list, seen only by her, which associated each student's name with a code number. The cover letter briefly described the study and requested that the student return the completed questionnaire within 15 days. To increase the rate of return, each participant was offered a chance to win a dinner for two at a local restaurant. Ten days after the initial mailing, students who had not returned their questionnaires were contacted by the project's

secretary to prompt the return of their questionnaire. No other contact was made with participants.

Results

Descriptive Findings

Of the 90 students who returned their questionnaires, 53% reported having a mentor. Over three fourths of the mentors were from the student's current university. Only 13% of the students had female mentors, although 47% of our respondents were female, and 20% of the full-time psychology faculty were female. Mentors typically held the rank of professor (71%), with assistant professors accounting for only 10% of the sample. On the average, students had known their mentors for 4.5 years.

Students who indicated that they had a mentor were asked about their reasons for choosing this individual. Five possibilities were listed on the questionnaire, and respondents were instructed to indicate whether or not the reason applied to their situation. Over 80% indicated that they sought out their mentor because of similiar interests. A perception of their mentor as an inspiring instructor was reported by 46%. A choice based on efforts by the mentor to establish a relationship was mentioned by 27%, 17% said they had been assigned to their mentor as an assistant, and 13% said their mentor had recruited them into a graduate program. Respondents were also questioned about their mentors' influences in their lives. Over 95% reported that their mentors were, at a minimum, considerably interested in their futures; 83% thought that their mentor would make a considerable or a great effort to help them find employment upon degree completion. The most important things mentors did for their students were to provide guidance (54%) and support (33%). The fact that one's mentor was viewed as intellectual and/or competent was most important to only 7% of the sample, and that they shared similar ideas or research interests to only 5%.

Respondents were asked to list, in order, the five most important characteristics of good mentors and the five characteristics that best described a bad mentor. Characteristics were weighted according to the rank the students assigned to each characteristic. The number of times a characteristic was listed was multiplied by the reverse of the ranking, and these products were summed to get a total importance score for each characteristic. The most frequently mentioned characteristic of good mentors was that they were interested and/or supportive of the student (see Table 1). Personality characteristics were listed second most frequently for a good mentor, and were the overwhelming first choice for bad mentors. For a good mentor, the personality dimension included such things as: a good sense of humor, honest, dedicated, empathetic, compassionate, genuine, patient, nonsexist, flexible, and loyal. For a bad mentor, personality characteristics included things such as rigidity, criticality, egocentricity, prejudice, personal pathology, rushed, overextended, disorganization, dishonesty, and untrustworthiness.

For five of the six categories, the bad mentors' characteristics were the negative side of the good mentors' characteristics. These included interested/supportive, personality characteristics, knowledgeable, unexploitative, and attitudes toward students. Being involved in research was the fifth most important characteristic of a good mentor; the sixth characteristic of a bad or negative mentor was being unavailable or inaccessible.

Students were generally satisfied with their mentors, as indicated by a mean satisfaction value of 8 on a scale of 10. Further, students expressed a moderate desire to be like their mentors (M rating = 6.7).

Respondents who indicated that they did not have a mentor were questioned about their reasons for this. Once again, students were presented with a series of statements reflecting reasons that might have applied to their situations. Over 68% indicated that they had been unable to find a satisfactory mentor, 46% indicated that their program did not encourage mentoring, 19% said that they had not been in their program long enough, and 17% reported no need for a mentor.

We tried to determine whether there were any differences between students who had mentors and those who did not, based on their reports of the type and amount of interaction they had with faculty members. Students were presented with a series of statements reflecting different types of student–faculty interactions and asked to indicate frequency of occurrence on a 5-point scale, from *never occurring* to *occurring on a weekly basis*. The 48 students who indicated that they had a mentor were asked to respond to each statement with respect to their mentor; the 42 who did not have mentors were asked to respond with respect to the one faculty member to whom they felt closest. Almost three fourths of all respondents indicated that they sought out faculty to discuss research ideas at least once or twice an ac-

Table 1. Important Characteristics Describing Good and Bad Mentors

Good Mentors		Bad Mentors	
Characteristic	Importance Score	Characteristic	Importance Score
Interested/Supportive	334	Uninterested/Unsupportive	176
Personality Characteristics	323	Personality Characteristics	543
Knowledgeable/Competent	196	Lacks Knowledge/Incompetent	83
Sharing/Giving and Unexploitative	102	Exploitative	150
Involved in Research/Resourceful	99		
Attitudes Toward Students	72	Attitudes Toward Students	80
		Unavailable/Inaccessible	79

ademic term. Discussions of plans of study or coursework occurred less frequently; over 59% of the respondents rarely or never sought out faculty to discuss their plan of study, and 66% rarely or never sought out faculty to discuss coursework. Only 14% of the students indicated that faculty sought them out to discuss coursework at least once or twice a term; however, 41% reported that they were sought out by faculty to discuss research ideas on a regular basis. The extent to which respondents socialized with faculty was fairly balanced between rarely or never (50.5%) and at least once or twice a term (49.7%).

The Role Mentors Play in Students' Lives

Fisher's Exact Test and chi-square tests were performed to determine the relationships between having a mentor and certain student demographic variables, or variables reflecting students' interactions with faculty. Pearson *r*s were calculated to determine relationships between several mentor characteristics and certain other variables. No significant relationships existed between having a mentor and students' sex, age, year in graduate school, or whether the student had a master's degree. A relationship was found between having a mentor and the program with which the student was associated, $\chi^2(5, N = 90) = 13.22, p < .05$. All respondents in the experimental and social interest groups had mentors; percentages for the other programs were 75% for developmental, 75% for industrial/organizational, 43% for clinical, and 40% for ecological psychology.

No relationship was found between having a mentor and satisfaction with the program; however, there was a significant positive relationship between degree of satisfaction with the mentor and satisfaction with the program, $r = .28$, $p < .05$.

Measures of student productivity included the number of publications authored, the number of first-authored publications, the number of conference papers authored, the number of first-authored conference papers, and the number of research projects since entering graduate school. Fisher's Exact Test was used to evaluate the relationships between these variables and presence or absence of a mentor. The first three measures of productivity showed significant positive relationships, $p < .05$. The first four indices of productivity were dichotomized to reflect one or fewer publications/papers or two or more publications/papers. This was done to increase cell sizes and allow the performance of Fisher's Exact Test. No significant relationship was found between having a mentor and the number of conference papers on which students were first author.

For the remaining category of productivity, data were dichotomized at four or fewer versus five or more research projects, and Fisher's Exact Test was performed. Students who had mentors had been involved in more projects ($M = 4.1$) since they began graduate school than those who did not have mentors ($M = 2.7$), $p < .05$. Only 10% of those who did not have mentors had been involved in five or more projects, compared to 41% of those who had mentors.

Students who had mentors were sought out more often by their mentors to discuss research ideas, $\chi^2(4, N = 87) = 12.55$, $p < .05$. The comparison was based on the faculty member to whom the mentorless students felt closest.

The final comparisons involved several demographic characteristics of the mentor as related to other items of interest. The following pairs of variables were tested: (a) mentors' gender and students' gender, (b) mentors' program and students' program, (c) years students had known their mentors and mentor satisfaction, and (d) the extent to which students aspired to be like their mentors and mentor satisfaction. Of the four relationships tested, three were significant: sex of the student was related to sex of the mentor chosen, $p < .05$, from Fisher's Exact Test; students' satisfaction with their mentors was related to the extent to which they aspired to be like them, $r = .47$, $p < .05$; and most mentors came from the students' own interest groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = 86.25$, $p < .05$.

Summary and Conclusions

Slightly over half of our respondents had mentors, predominantly male, full professors from the students' current institutions and programs. However, students in the ecological interest group believed that mentoring relationships were discouraged by their faculty, and clinical students had mentors less often than social and experimental students, all of whom had mentors. The clinical students may have had less opportunity for close research ties, although one might have expected this to be compensated for by opportunities to cooperate in other professional activities.

Our study provides some reason to doubt that a true mentor can be "assigned" to a student. Most students entered into such relationships as a result of seeking out a faculty member who had similar interests. Students thought that faculty less often sought out students with a view to becoming their mentors.

Although a slightly greater proportion of females than males in our sample had mentors, student demographic characteristics did not reliably discriminate those who did from those who did not have mentors. This was somewhat surprising, yet encouraging, for females. It has been suggested that women have difficulties in finding satisfactory mentor relationships (Bogat & Redner, 1984; Moore, 1982), and are thus not afforded the same opportunities as males.

The fact that as large a percentage of females as males had mentors does not contradict the claim that there is a frequent lack of female role models within academia, and that a lack of role models may inhibit the career advancement of women (Bolton, 1980). Only 13% of the students had female mentors, which may be a function of the limited number of female faculty in the sample. Only 12 of 61 full-time faculty members in the psychology department were female, and only 4 held the rank of full professor, whereas 34 of 49 males were full professors.

The effects of female role models or mentors on the professional development of women deserve further study. In our sample, however, the most obvious sex-related problem is that male students avoid female faculty members; of the six students with female mentors, not one was male. Females chose female mentors in about the proportion that one would expect from the proportion of faculty who were female. A significant female preference for female mentors might emerge if female faculty had higher academic rank,

taught more courses that tend to foster mentoring relationships, and had more research grants.

Other results from this study suggest that mentoring promotes productivity at early stages of professional development. Students with mentors demonstrated higher levels of productivity in research, publications, and conference papers than those without mentors. This finding is consistent with research that investigated the effects of sponsorship on students' predoctoral productivity (Reskin, 1979). Predoctoral productivity probably has a significant effect on students' future career success.

Departments and institutions that discourage mentoring relationships seem to be misguided. Most students are satisfied with their mentors, and are more productive when working in such a relationship. Students who do not have mentors usually regret this lack. Although we did not investigate the mentoring relationship from the point of view of faculty members, it is likely that faculty productivity, like student productivity, is increased in mentoring relationships.

Individual faculty members, according to our survey, might well consider taking a more active role in recruiting students into such relationships. The very act of showing interest in the student would demonstrate one of the most desirable characteristics for mentors: showing interest in, and a willingness to support the student. Students seldom think that faculty members lack the competence, research activity, or intellectual ability to do a good job as mentors. The personality, not the intellect, of mentors is the prime determinant of their desirability. And by personality we do not mean a set of immutable personal qualities; we mean qualities like caring and fairness, which may well be subject to cognitive control.

Finally, students who take the initiative and find satisfactory mentors seem to be well-advised. Advantages of having a mentor are already visible at this period of their careers. They have more contact with faculty and are more productive. We expect that their increased productivity, in conjunction with direct help from the mentor, will assist them in their first job placements, which will in turn make a difference throughout their careers.

Our understanding of the effects of mentoring on the development of psychologists could benefit from investigations extending this line of research. Extensive surveys of students from other departments in other colleges and universities would provide a more comprehensive view of mentoring and its effects on students' professional development. Related studies are also needed to determine the effects of mentoring relationships on faculty members and their departments.

References

Atwood, A. H. (1979, November). The mentor in clinical practice. *Nursing Outlook*, 714–717.

Baack, J. E., Brown, R. D., DeCoster, D. A., Kramer, M., Sanstead, M., Story, K., & Williams, V. (1981). Student development mentoring-transcript project. *Journal of College Student and Personnel, 22*, 167–168.

Bensahel, J. G. (1977). Let your protege make his own way. *International Management, 32*(5), 44–46.

Bogat, G. A., & Redner, R. (1984). *Mentoring in academia and how it affects women*. Unpublished manuscript, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Bolton, E. B. (1980). A conceptual analysis of the mentor relationship in the career development of women. *Adult Education, 30*, 195–207.

Borman, C., & Colson, S. (1984). Mentoring—An effective career guidance technique. *The Vocational Guidance Quarterly, 32*(3), 192–197.

Bradley, P. A. (1981). Mentors in individual education. *Improving College and University Teaching, 29*, 136–140.

Burton, A. (1977). The mentoring dynamic in therapeutic transformation. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 37*, 115–122.

Cameron, S. W., & Blackburn, R. T. (1981). Sponsorship and academic career success. *Journal of Higher Education, 52*, 369–377.

Collins, E., & Scott, P. (1978). Everyone who makes it has a mentor: Interviews with F. J. Lunding, G. L. Clements, and D. S. Perkins. *Harvard Business Review, 56*(4), 89–101.

Crane, D. (1965). Scientists at major and minor universities: A study of productivity and recognition. *American Sociological Review, 30*, 699–714.

Dalton, G. W., Thompson, P. H., & Price, R. L. (1977). The four stages of professional careers—A new look at performance by professionals. *Organizational Dynamics, 6*(1), 19–42.

Erickson, K. A., & Pitner, N. J. (1980). The mentor concept is alive and well. *NASSP Bulletin, 64*, 8–13.

Goldstein, E. (1979). Effect of same-sex and cross-sex role models on the subsequent productivity of scholars. *American Psychologist, 34*, 407–410.

Halcomb, R. (1980). Mentors and the successful women. *Across the Board, 17*(2), 13–18.

Johnson, M. C. (1980). Speaking from experience: Mentors—The key to development and growth. *Training and Development Journal, 34*(7), 55–57.

Kram, K. E. (1983). Phases of the mentor relationship. *Academy of Management Journal, 26*, 608–625.

Levinson, D. J. (1978). *Seasons of a man's life*. New York: Knopf.

Long, J. S. (1978). Productivity and academic position in the scientific career. *American Sociological Review, 43*, 889–908.

Moore, K. M. (1982). The role of mentors in developing leaders for academe. *Educational Record*, Winter, 23–28.

Price, M. (1981, June). Corporate godfathers by appointment only. *Industry Week*, 71–73.

Rawlins, M. E., & Rawlins, L. (1983). Mentoring and networking for helping professionals. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 62*(2), 116–118.

Reskin, B. F. (1979). Academic sponsorship and scientists' careers. *Sociology of Education, 52*, 129–146.

Roche, G. R. (1979). Much ado about mentors. *Harvard Business Review, 57*(1), 14–28.

Schmidt, J., & Wolfe, J. (1980). The mentor partnership: Discovery of professionalism. *NASPS Journal, 17*(3), 45–51.

Shapiro, E., Haseltine, F., & Rowe, M. (1978). Moving up: Role models, mentors and the "patron system." *Sloane Management Review, 19*, 51–58.

Singer, D. L. (1982). Professional socialization and adult development in graduate professional education. *New Directions for Experimental Learning*, 6, 45–63.

Speizer, J. J. (1981). Role models, mentors and sponsors: The elusive concepts. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 6, 692–712.

Note

Requests for reprints should be sent to Terry Cronan-Hillix, Department of Psychology, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182–0350.