

CONNECTING THE GENERATIONS: YOUNGER FACULTY MENTORING OLDER FACULTY

Ellen M. Burkemper, Ph.D., and Marla Berg-Weger, Ph.D., Saint Louis University

More experienced, but chronologically younger, faculty can pass on gerontological academic interest to junior, but chronologically older, faculty. This narrative reflects the importance of interpersonal relationships in intellectual inquiry. The interweaving of personal life events with professional expertise can provide some insight towards understanding the development of an academic gerontological social work partnership.

Academic mentoring typically occurs when chronologically older, more experienced, faculty 'take on' younger, less experienced, faculty. The benefits are obvious. The academic journey of the older faculty member translates into advising and collaborations in scholarly activities. Both parties benefit. What can be considered atypical is the reverse: a chronologically younger faculty member mentoring a person older than herself.

The interweaving of our stories reflects the mutuality or reciprocity of relationship and brings together each of our privileged knowledges. Wilson, Pereira, and Valentine (2002) note that a mentor's main role is often viewed within the context of helping junior faculty get published in order to gain tenure. This was not true for us. Our journey together began informally (Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). I first met my mentor when she was a doctoral student and I was serving as an adjunct faculty member at the same university and in the same school. We shared the small office dedicated to both doctoral students and adjunct faculty. We talked primarily about our families. This happenstance sharing of an office has led to an extraordinary academic mentoring experience in gerontological social work.

Our story brings together the importance of personal experiences with older adults and reverse intergenerational professional mentoring of junior faculty. In this narrative,

we each reflect on the ways in which our own life experiences shaped our professional lives and how those experiences led to our collaborations in gerontological social work. Further, we share our mutual journey in developing a collaborative partnership in our intellectual development and scholarly productivity.

The Mentor's Story

As a social worker, I have worked with older adults throughout most of my career. I began as a BSW student completing my practicum in an Area Agency on Aging and went on to work as an adult service worker in public welfare and as a medical social worker in a home health agency and hospital before moving into academia. As a social worker in academia, I began teaching family medical residents in geriatric rotations and am now a faculty member in a joint BSW/MSW program where I teach an aging course; study family caregiver well being, dementia and driving issues, and dementia training; and volunteer with several older adult service agencies.

I have to credit my grandmothers for unknowingly teaching me that there is much to learn from older adults. My grandmothers had little formal education and were both farm women who worked hard all their lives with minimal luxuries. Neither would say she had much to offer the world, but they taught me such valuable life skills as cooking, sewing,

needlework, and gardening. Two lessons they taught me were the most valuable and ones neither woman even knew she was teaching. In very different ways, my grandmothers showed me the importance of nurturing others, and that the older adult is an interesting, unique resource with whom a younger person can spend *enjoyable* time.

I was fortunate that these two important women lived to be elderly and that I got to know and appreciate them in my own womanhood. Because I was a social work professional working with the older adult population, I hope they were able to see that they had such a powerful impact on my life. I know neither of them would acknowledge that credit, but I know it.

Having had the positive experiences of living near all of my grandparents for much of my childhood, I always felt comfortable being with and talking to the older adults, something that I found uncommon in many of my contemporaries in my BSW/MSW programs. I was not uncomfortable being in the company of older persons.

As with all of us in the helping professions, my life experiences served to mold me into the professional that I became. Building on my strengths, knowledge, and familiarity with older persons, I have always gravitated toward working with older adults, their families, and the issues that challenge them.

In my life as an academic social worker, I have been fortunate to work with other social workers interested in gerontological social work practice. These other social workers have mentored me and served as role models for being a social worker and a researcher. From my mentors, I have learned the importance of studying our aging population and the value of using a strengths-based approach to understand caregiver well-being. From this 'older generation' of social workers, I have, again, learned important life lessons.

Like my grandmothers, I knew my role was to pass along my knowledge to another generation. I never planned to become a mentor. If I had considered mentoring, I would never have planned on mentoring a colleague with many more years of clinical and life experience. Yet, my colleague and I fell easily and naturally into a collegial relationship in which we shared, commiserated, and grew personally and professionally.

I have particularly valued our relationship as I have watched my colleague join our faculty and grow into her position as a full-time faculty member. In particular, I have enjoyed working with my colleague as she has developed an interest in gerontological social work. Social workers interested in working with older adults are a typically passionate group, and it has been exciting to observe another join this enthusiasm.

For a role I never envisioned for myself, particularly with an older, more experienced social work clinician, I have gained much. I have had the opportunity to share my passion for gerontological social work and my experiences in academia as well as learn from my colleague's significant life and social work experiences. My relationship with my protégé has become an important part of my academic life. I look forward to this mutually beneficial partnership growing even more.

The Protégé's Story

Unlike my mentor, I was raised in the city. My early female role models were my maternal grandmother and my mother. My grandmother had six children. My mother had five children. I had four children. All three of us engaged in out-of-the-house activities. My grandmother had encouraged my mother to go to college, rather unusual given the times. My mother was in college in the early 1930s and it was there that she met my father. It was understood in my nuclear family that everyone, including the females, would have

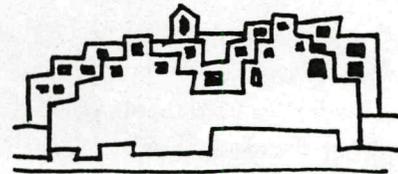
an occupation. Given my time, the early 1960s, there were two professions open to females: nursing and teaching. I chose nursing.

As a nurse, I worked on the medical unit. At that time, the term medical unit implied that there would be a large number of older adults, with various ailments, staying in the hospital for a long time. I came to appreciate the stories I heard from my patients. While working in the hospital setting, I was asked to become a registered nurse consultant for selected nursing homes.

Working in a nursing home was a new experience for me. When I was younger, older individuals were taken care of at home. My maiden aunt had taken care of my maternal grandmother. My paternal aunt had taken care of her parents, as they experienced their physical decline. This matter-of-fact assumption of my family was to influence how my parents would be taken care of in their old age.

Working in the nursing homes reinforced for me the importance of maintaining the usual connections and environments for older adults. Working in the nursing homes made me aware of the vulnerability of older adults and their dependence on, and the importance of, family. This experience also pointed out to me that older individuals who were in nursing homes did not seem to fare as well as those who were taken care of at home. I noticed the cognitive decline as more apparent for those in nursing homes as opposed to those that I had ministered to in the hospital setting.

After I received my MSW, I went to work as a clinical social worker in a community mental health center. I noticed that a strong support system seemed to be one of the keys to helping those with mental illness. So, I began my doctoral work in marriage and family to try to discover how to facilitate my understandings and my ability to be of service to this population of clients.



The Protégé's Perspective: How the Mentor and Protégé Came Together

During the time we shared our office, my mentor also talked about her interest and research in gerontology. I listened. After my mentor's graduation, she became a faculty member at a nearby social work program. Her new university happened to be the same university where I was engaged for my doctoral work. We did not really see much of each other or even talk by phone. Periodically, she asked me to speak on my area of expertise, ethics, for some programs. I began to teach part time at her program. A full time faculty position became a possibility and my mentor suggested I apply now that I had finished my doctorate. I would never have applied had it not been for her encouragement. I did not believe that sort of position could be open to me! It was, and I did apply, and, ultimately, received an invitation to join the faculty. We were now working in the same school, though our scholarly interests were different.

Being an academic social worker on a full-time basis was a new experience for me. I had been in clinical practice for twenty years and had taught a number of courses, but I was just starting out in my full-time academic career. During the time I have known my mentor, my father died and my mother's health was failing. Curiously, my mentor was one of the very few people, outside my family, with whom I shared my concerns about my parents.

This concurrent journey with my colleague and with my parents reawakened my interest in gerontology. There were so many concerns. My four siblings, their spouses, my husband and I had to determine ways to help my

parents. We had always been involved with them, helping them, and talking with them. We devised a method of helping our parents and 'spreading out' the responsibility of care. My/our mother had taken care of my/our father. In retrospect, we probably could have been even more help to them while my father's health was failing. After dad died, and as mother became more fragile, my brothers, their wives, my husband, and I developed a plan.

We met for lunch or supper every week in our effort to help mother live comfortably in her home, the solution of her choice. Mother used to refer to these gatherings as "a meeting of the minds." Before the meetings, we would ask mother if she wanted to relay any particular information for the meeting. At the meetings, we would discuss such things as doctor visits, the current medications, who would visit mother on what day, who would pay the around-the-clock caretakers, who would shop for food, and who would pay house and medical bills. We would then offer this information to mother for her approval.

I periodically shared with my mentor what was going on concerning my mother. She listened. Over time, she indicated that how my family worked together had not yet been noted in social work gerontology literature. Would the family be willing to be part of a case study? At the next weekly meeting, the family agreed. The case study was conducted and subsequently published (Berg-Weger, Burkemper, Tebb, & Rubio, 2001).

This blending of personal life with academic research initially gave me pause. I wondered about the sharing of information. What would my family, my colleagues think of me? On the other hand, how my family worked together for our mother was a very positive approach. I was proud of my family. I trusted my mentor. I had a history with her. She had always been up-front with me. She has an intellectual curiosity that was transmitted to me. The gerontology subject matter that

she was interested in was an ongoing event in my life.

However, there were other considerations. I was older than my mentor. I was a junior faculty member (a curious designation when one is older). The reverse of generation roles and academic statuses was something to consider. What could not occur was arrogance by either of us. My mentor was cultivating and transforming my life experience into an opportunity as an academic. She did not have an actual need to conduct this research. She was already involved in a number of research projects and was published.

Just talking about the concerns of the elderly has now become more interesting for me. My mentor has involved me in a second project to infuse gerontology content into the curriculum at our school, the GeroRich Project. She encouraged me to attend a Faculty Development Institute on gerontology. This Institute brought forth ideas for infusing gerontology content into our BSW and MSW curricula. We then provided opportunities for our fellow faculty to hear ideas as to how to infuse this content into their courses.

Prior to these experiences, I had generally used examples in lecture and given assignments that were geared toward the nuclear family constellation, omitting the fact that grandparents could, in fact, be living with the nuclear family, or that grandparents were serving as 'parents.' I had not included readings specific to older adults. I did not select texts specific to discussions of the concerns of older persons. My teaching perspective has changed. All in all, my mentor has had a comprehensive effect on my academic career in my education, publishing, and teaching.

Chronologically older and academically more experienced social work gerontologists mentored my mentor. She took the opportunity to mentor me and thereby impact

my professional development in research, education, and teaching. This mentoring experience could not have happened without both of us taking hold of the opportunity. The richness of the experience could possibly lay in the differences within our generational perspectives. With the reciprocal sharing of views, each of our 'wisdoms' came together for our professional, personal, and interpersonal growth.

Lessons Learned

As we have reflected on the evolution of our mentoring relationship, we would like to share the lessons that we have learned about the development of mentoring relationships:

- Do not assume you have to be older to be a mentor. Instead concentrate on the resources that each person brings to the conversation. Arrogance could have distracted us from the opportunities we experienced. For instance, the protégé's possible assumption that someone younger 'would not understand' her family situation could have inhibited the interaction surrounding the research project.

- Our experience was unique, but one from which others can learn. The mentor's sense of compassion and empathy for the protégé's lived experience, coupled with her research experience, helped to ease the protégé's personal situation and, at the same time, provided an opportunity for professional growth. Each of us used the strengths of our life experiences to move forward in understanding and translating our experiences to each other and to others.

- A mentor is a close and trusted guide. This trust is often associated with the shared development of experiences, identified areas of interest, and a building of interpersonal history. While our society generally views the older individual as having more wisdom, in

the mentoring experience it is trust, as well, that is important.

- Both of us were open to new experiences. Sometimes, we view older individuals as 'set in their ways.' This openness allowed each of us to move forward in our understanding of older individuals and their families. Now, we are translating those experiences into other avenues through our teaching social work students.

- The mentor's interest, time, and effort would appear to center toward the passing on of gerontological understandings to the junior faculty member. It, though, was much more than that. The literature indicates that junior faculty experience role expectations that may appear ambiguous, or at least unclear (Schrodt et al., 2003). The experienced process of being mentored brings home the importance of this relationship in academia. The concurrent benefits of having a mentor are that the junior faculty member gains assistance in sorting through institution expectations and socialization processes, and leads to a stronger sense of ownership in departments (Schrodt et al., 2003.)

- Social work practitioners could possibly benefit from our story. This experience of mentoring/being mentored and of writing our reflections begs the question, "Who else have we mentored, or who else has mentored us?"

Conclusion

As noted, the mentor in this narrative took a traditional path in her academic experience. The protégé, on the other hand, was a twenty-year social work practitioner who was late in coming to academia. These paths converged specifically around gerontological social work. This was a building process that relied on the strengths and expertise of each of the participants.

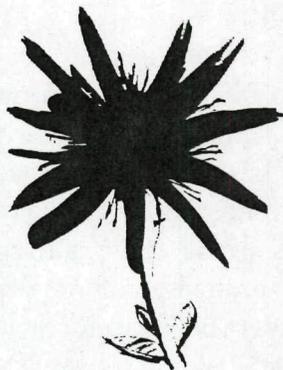
Our interpersonal, personal, and academic relationship has lasted for over a decade. Passing on knowledge is a process, not an event. This reflection illustrates how two academic generations of gerontologists helped to open possibilities for a junior, yet chronologically older, colleague. The “making of a gerontologist” can involve past and present life events intersecting with academic interests. This relayed experience illustrates the importance of avoiding the assumption that one has to be chronologically older to mentor.

This narrative reflects the fact that we were involved in each other’s learning (Wilson et al., 2002). The co-construction of our partnership (Mullen, 2000) allowed us to move forward in our understanding of gerontology, interweaving the clinical and personal with scholarly experience. The mentoring endeavor is often viewed within the context of chronologically older faculty mentoring junior and younger faculty. Our case example is isomorphic to the whole point of gerontology, that of learning from and building on the strengths of older individuals. Respecting the specialized knowledges of each individual is what makes partnerships successful. We each contributed to the other’s learning (Mullen, 2000).

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Ellen M. Burkemper is Associate Professor in the Saint Louis University School of Social Service. Marla Berg-Weger is Associate Professor in the Saint Louis University School of Social Service and Associate Provost at Saint Louis University. Questions or comments regarding this narrative can be sent to: burkemem@slu.edu.



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