

Mentoring as Parallel Process

Stephen Edward McMillin

Abstract: Although mentoring for doctoral students in social work is increasingly discussed, discourse on mentoring often emphasizes strategies over mechanisms. This reflection offers the author's experience of relationship-based mentoring that follows the parallel process theorized to mediate relationship-based social interventions. Examples of relational mentoring in social work teaching are offered, and implications for this model of mentoring in social work doctoral education are discussed.

Keywords: mentoring; mentor; parallel process; social work; teaching assistant

How does mentoring work for social work doctoral students learning to become teachers of social work? What do we theorize are its primary mechanisms or mediators?

As I look back on several years in graduate school, I am increasingly convinced that the mentoring I received as a doctoral student in social work was, and continues to be, mediated through a relationship-based parallel process similar to what might be present between supervisors and practitioners, as well as practitioners and clients in relational social work interventions.

Mentoring for doctoral students (and for the tenure-track junior faculty they often aim to become) has received growing attention in the social work literature (Berger, 1990; Wilson, Valentine, & Perreira, 2002; Maramaldi et al., 2004; Simon, Roff, & Perry, 2008; Vakalahi & Hardin Starks, 2010). However, scholarship on mentoring often focuses on measurable components of successful or effective mentoring, with less conceptual attention to how mentoring achieves its effects or what mentoring mechanisms can be theorized or identified. This reflection looks at a turning point in my own journey over the past several years, linking my experience to aspects of the parallel process.

The Parallel Process

The parallel process is a term used in developmental psychology to describe how developing a new relationship can result in transfer or changes to other relationships (Goldberg, 1977; Parlakian, 2002). This phenomenon has been noted in multigenerational families, where young adolescent mothers' relationships with their own mothers are observed to influence the way the young mothers

parent their babies (Hans & Thullen, 2009). Social programs such as early childhood home visitation commonly integrate the parallel process into service delivery, anticipating that in and through reflective supervision, modeling, and mirroring, workers will transfer positive interactions with their supervisors to positive ways of interacting with program participants, who will then transfer those positive interactions to their relationships with their children (Tomlin, 2007; Tomlin, Sturm, & Koch, 2009). Bernstein and Edwards (2012) suggest that such parallel process relationships can be present in professional relationships and build mutual competence, as both members of the relational dyad effectively read each other's signals, share ideas and experiences, and feel gratified and successful as a result.

Gilkerson and Kopel (2005) define parallel process as "how relationships affect relationships at all levels" (p. 352), and suggest that these relationships exist at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels and filter forward to individuals. Collaboration, regularity of contact, and mutual competence are the hallmarks of the parallel process. People in relationships see one another frequently and in a safe setting in order to be able to stimulate and learn from one another. Pawl and St. John (1998) describe the parallel process as a variant of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto others" (p. 7). Pilkington and Malinowski (2002) suggest the parallel process operates across environments so that what is learned in one environment (e.g., as a teaching assistant) is institutionalized into daily routines and rituals later (e.g., as a teacher).

The parallel process has been framed as an empowerment process. Lee and colleagues (2013)

in their study of worker burnout note that supervisory support helps prevent worker burnout when it is a parallel process of empowerment. Staff will not be able to empower participants in social programs if they do not perceive being empowered by those who train and supervise them. In my time in graduate school, I can identify a turning point in my professional trajectory in which an empowering parallel process relationship with a mentor improved my teaching and my self-concept as a teacher of social work. For the remainder of this reflection, I will share examples of this turning point and how I perceive the parallel process as active.

Transition to Independent Teaching

Doctoral students in social work often are required or encouraged to serve as teaching assistants for part of their time in the program; the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE) formally recommends that students have opportunities to engage in teaching and explicitly links these opportunities to faculty mentorship (Anastas et al., 2003, pp. 10-11). Since doctoral students may be matched to academic advisors in their PhD program based on mutual research and teaching interests, students may have enhanced opportunities to teach with these faculty members. This was my experience, and it served as a turning point in my teaching development, which I now recognize as occurring through the parallel process. I was excited about teaching and had completed my program's requirements (two academic quarters as a teaching assistant or "TA") far ahead of schedule. Since I had no further obligation to serve as a teaching assistant, I was selective about future TA work, and I sought out professors whom I thought could give me a "master class" in teaching social work. Ultimately I ended up serving as a TA in the research class taught by my academic advisor for a total of five times, and it truly was a master class and advanced teaching workshop for me.

Just as reflective supervision provides a set, recurring time for supervisor and practitioner to meet, as a teaching assistant I had a set, recurring time to meet with the professor to plan the lesson and instruction of the class, and later to review student performance. This was an intimate time, in which we discussed our initial assessments of the students in the class, frustrations with student motivation or participation, and even frustrations

with aspects of the curriculum or content of the class. After "TA-ing" the same class again with my teaching mentor, I perceived that it was okay to feel that frustration, and iteratively, experientially learned that frustration in teaching is tolerable and manageable. Our teaching routine had become a developmental secure base (Bowlby, 1988). Just as a child who has become attached to its parent is empowered to explore the environment beyond the parent, as a TA with a good teaching mentor, I was empowered to explore the environment beyond any one class and iteratively reflect on the teaching process. As a TA I witnessed the expert teacher in action, and later modeled and mirrored the aspects of effective teaching that I observed; the teaching mentor witnessed and responded to my teaching efforts and offered iterative, reflective feedback over time. We both grew in mutual competence as our teaching improved and unfolded over several courses together.

Both mentor and mentee also feel empowered to recognize and adapt when their teaching was less than optimal or when students were particularly challenging. My teaching experiences with my mentor were advanced (second-year MSW) research classes that students found challenging. My mentor was very patient in letting me test-drive teaching topics that greatly interested me, such as effect sizes, and seeing for myself how this may have been an ambitious topic for these students. My future teaching benefited, as I adjusted how to teach complex concepts and hone my skills in meeting students where they were.

From serving as a successful TA, doctoral students may move up to serve as instructors and adjunct professors in their own or nearby social work programs. This was my experience; I ended up independently teaching three of the classes I had "TA'ed." With a secure base in my teaching mentor, I had no apprehension about teaching after graduation, as I had spent the past three years teaching one to two classes every quarter and learning experientially to balance teaching with research and service.

As an adjunct professor I experienced teaching dilemmas. I did not hesitate to return to my teaching mentor and process with her the nature of the issue and how I might best resolve it. My

mentor was still my secure base. She was there when I needed her. Just as in adolescent development the teenager begins to turn away from parents and toward their own peer group (Meeus, 1994), the soon-to-graduate doctoral student developmentally can turn away from the “nest” of the doctoral program and advisor and toward truly independent teaching.

Implications for Social Work Mentoring

As a Ph.D. student, I experienced mentoring as a relationship-based parallel process in which mentor and mentee reflectively influence one another and together achieve mutual competence. However, the potential of this relational, developmental model of mentoring does not mean that it will be easy or automatic in many social work Ph.D. programs.

Stoesz, Karger, and Carrilio (2010) suggest that too many social work doctoral programs are underfunded and under-staffed, with consequences “in the retail end” (p. 110) when Ph.D. students must recruit mentors on small faculties who receive no reduction in other duties when they take on a Ph.D. student. Social context stressors may help disengage mothers from their infants (Sokolowski, Hans, Bernstein, & Cox, 2007); in Ph.D. programs they seem unlikely to promote good mentoring.

Parallel process relationships take time and stability to develop. Gilkerson (2004) suggests that social programs seeking to move to relationship-based reflective practice may need five years to do so. This is a common length for many Ph.D. programs and gives Ph.D. students unique, multi-year opportunities to develop parallel process relationships in a model of mentoring, which I found increased my confidence and self-efficacy as a teacher. However, the increasing time-to-degree for social work doctorates is linked to high student debt (Anastas, 2012), while the many part-time Ph.D. students noted by Stoesz et al. (2010) may be less able to develop parallel process relationships if they are infrequently on campus and busy with non-academic concerns. Both mentors and mentees in the social work academy will have to discern good-enough graduate school timeframes that allow parallel process relationships to unfold and thrive, but also empower mentees to leave the Ph.D. “nest”

and become inspiring mentors themselves.

References

- Anastas, J. W. (2012). *Doctoral education in social work*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Anastas, J. W., Bronson, D., Crook, W., Doueck, H. J., Harold, R. D., Ross-Sheriff, F., & Wilson, R. (2003). *Guidelines for quality in social work doctoral programs* (revised 2003). Richmond, VA: Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education. Retrieved October 26, 2012 from: <http://www.gadephd.org/documents/gadeguidelines.pdf>
- Berger, R. M. (1990). Getting published: A mentoring program for social work faculty. *Social Work, 35*(1), 69.
- Bernstein, V. J., & Edwards, R. C. (2012). Supporting early childhood practitioners through relationship-based, reflective supervision. *NHSA Dialog, 15*(3), 286-301. doi: 10.1080/15240754.2012.694495
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilkerson, L. (2004). Irving B. Harris Distinguished Lecture: Reflective supervision in infant-family programs: Adding clinical process to nonclinical settings. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 25*(5), 424-439. doi: 10.1002/imhj.20017
- Gilkerson, L., & Kopel, C. C. (2005). Relationship-based systems change: Illinois' model for promoting social-emotional development in part C early intervention. *Infants & Young Children: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Special Care Practices, 18*(4), 349-365.
- Goldberg, S. (1977). Social competence in infancy: A model of parent-infant interaction. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 23*, 163-178.
- Hans, S. L., & Thullen, M. J. (2009). The relational context of adolescent motherhood. *Handbook of infant mental health* (3rd ed.) (pp. 214-229). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Lee, E., Esaki, N., Kim, J., Greene, R., Kirkland, K., & Mitchell-Herzfeld, S. (2013). Organizational climate and burnout among home visitors: Testing mediating effects of empowerment. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*(4), 594-602. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.01.011
- Maramaldi, P., Gardner, D., Berkman, B., Ireland,

- K., D'Ambruso, S., & Howe, J. L. (2004). Mentoring new social work faculty. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 25(1), 89-106. doi:10.1300/J021v25n01_06 ER -
- Meeus, W. (1994). Psychosocial problems and social support in adolescence. In F. Nestmann & K. Hurrelmann (Eds.), *Social networks and social support in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 241-256). Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Parlakian, R. (2002). *Reflective supervision in practice: Stories from the field*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.
- Pawl, J. H., & St. John, M. (1998). *How you are is as important as what you do...in making a positive difference for infants, toddlers and their families*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.
- Pilkington, K. O., & Malinowski, M. (2002). The natural environment II: Uncovering deeper responsibilities within relationship-based services. *Infants & Young Children: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Special Care Practices*, 15(2), 78-84.
- Simon, C. E., Roff, L. L., & Perry, A. R. (2008). Psychosocial and career mentoring: Female African American social work education administrators' experiences. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 44(1), 9-22.
- Sokolowski, M. S., Hans, S. L., Bernstein, V. J., & Cox, S. M. (2007). Mothers' representations of their infants and parenting behavior: Associations with personal and social-contextual variables in a high-risk sample. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 28(3), 344-365. doi: 10.1002/imhj.20140
- Stoesz, D., Karger, H. J., & Carrilio, T. E. (2010). *A dream deferred: How social work education lost its way and what can be done*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Tomlin, A. M. (2007). Parent-provider relationships in early care settings. In B. Spodek & O. Saracho (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives on social learning in early childhood education* (pp. 179-202). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Tomlin, A. M., Sturm, L., & Koch, S. M. (2009). Observe, listen, wonder, and respond: A preliminary exploration of reflective function skills in early care providers. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 30(6), 634-647. doi: 10.1002/imhj.20233
- Vakalahi, H. F. O., & Hardin Starks, S. (2010). The complexities of becoming visible: Reflecting on the stories of women of color as social work educators. *Affilia*, 25(2), 110-122. doi:10.1177/0886109910364343
- Wilson, P. P., Valentine, D., & Pereira, A. (2002). Perceptions of new social work faculty about mentoring experiences. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 38(2), 317-333.

About the Author: Stephen Edward McMillin, M.S.W., Ph.D. is Director of the MSW Program, The School of Social Work, Saint Louis University (314-977-3322; mcmillins@slu.edu).