

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Mentoring in the Helping Professions

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**Abstract:** The narratives included in this special edition on Mentoring in the Helping Professions expand the concept of mentoring beyond a traditional dyadic master-apprentice relationship to include developmental networks of relationships across personal and professional spaces. The mentoring relationships represented here reflect the broad diversity of mentoring relationships between and among students, faculty, practitioners, and even animals. Yet, these narratives also return to many of the same key themes including gratitude, reciprocal learning, role transitions from mentee to mentor, cultural dimensions of mentoring, and interactions between environment and mentoring relationships. We hope that these reflections enliven an ongoing conversation about mentoring in the field of social work, given the critical role of these relationships and their potential to inspire and support social workers across their professional lifespan.

**Keywords:** dyadic master-apprentice relationship; developmental networks; mentoring; reciprocal learning; cultural dimensions of mentoring

When we first embarked on this journey as co-editors of the special edition on Mentoring in the Helping Professions, our interests were academic and experiential. Jennifer had written about her own mentoring experiences in social work post-doctoral training. Mark was speaking and consulting on mentoring relationships in higher education. The narratives and stories we received spoke to a deep and very personal side of the mentoring experiences of professional social workers and students.

They expanded our initial conceptions of mentoring, taking the once traditional dyadic master-apprentice relationship to the much more contemporary realm of developmental networks of relationships that crisscross our personal and professional lives. They showed us the many sources of support we receive and how we offer it. They highlighted the all-important role of diverse identities and ways of being as points of connection in mentoring relationships, as well as how they in turn inform social work learning and practice.

They even pushed the boundaries of mentorship beyond human connections, illustrating how institutions, native traditions, and even animals can play a mentoring role for many of us. Finally, these reflections represent thoughts and experiences across the professional lifespan. They show students learning the ropes with master teachers and practitioners. They portray junior and senior faculty mentoring and being mentored into their respective

roles in preparing the next generations of professionals. The papers we have selected represent a cross-section of those themes.

Stephen McMillin opens our special issue with his reflections on the influential mentoring relationship he has in a “master class and advanced teaching workshop” with his doctoral advisor. His description of the parallel process of relational mentoring is infused with lessons learned with his mentor and steeped in the research on mentoring in higher education. Dr. McMillin's reflection sets a scholarly foundation for the papers that follow.

The gifts and gratitude that flow from strong mentoring relationships – so well described by McMillin – continue with Johanna Slivinske's narrative. She reflects on four influential mentoring relationships that shaped her collegiate, graduate, and professional careers. Ms. Slivinske's mentors emphasized “introspection and reflection” and the conceptualization of her “dream” just as Daniel Levinson (1978) proposed was at the core of mentoring relationships in his seminal work, *Seasons of a Man's Life*. She brings the mentoring “full-circle” to describe her excitement at anticipating a new mentee and hoping to share the most important gift which mentors and mentees exchange: believing in each other.

Sister Angela Kim, Ph.D., continues the theme of multiple mentoring relationships as she introduces the concept of cultural and global sensitivity. Sr.

Kim's reflections on being bicultural Korean-American echo the process of identity formation discussed by McMillin and Slivinske. Her narrative challenges us to recognize the importance of cultural awareness to social work students and practitioners in our ever more global world. She attributes the strength of her bicultural identity to the "fine teaching and mentorship" of her professors and dissertation advisor. For Sr. Kim, mentoring is her "way to share and pay forward what I have received from them in my life."

Dr. Jerry Watson shares his experiences as a "Y kid" creating his earliest "developmental network" of advanced peers and adult role models. He reflects on his identity as an African American male from the ghetto. From his network and the principles of the YMCA, he learned, "I had a responsibility to help others. I learned the lesson of giving back at the YMCA." He describes finding the roots of his life's work at the Y. Building trust and role modeling became hallmarks of his mentoring and social work "in the real world," as he engaged issues of racial similarity and difference in those same relationships.

Dr. Suzanne Cross and her colleagues reflect on yet another aspect of cultural diversity in their narrative about mentoring in the context of American Indian cultural constructs. They emphasize the roles elders play in teaching and guiding mentees that "allow the mentee to experiment and learn by doing." They also remind us that everyone has "skills and abilities to share. Therefore, all are able to learn from one another." We hear the voices of the members of this mentoring "team" as they share reflections and lessons among themselves and with their mentor.

Dr. Patricia L. Westerman and her colleagues bring our discussion into the very real world of therapeutic interventions. They describe their multi-layered mentoring relationships among program management, instructors, volunteers and riders in the context of equine facilitated therapy. Applying Bandura's (1977) model of self-efficacy to their mentoring, participants experience greater confidence and connectedness. A unique element of this paper is the suggestion that "even the horses serve as mentors to the riders as the animals provide positive reinforcement and teach the riders, through their feedback, how to become more competent and

confident in their riding." Dr. Westerman and her colleagues make a strong case for a sound theoretical foundation to inform the mentoring and development of instructors, volunteers, and clients.

Finally, we bring the reflections "full-circle" as Dr. John Kayser reflects on becoming "a curmudgeon" in the later years of his professional work. Dr. Kayser's painfully honest essay shows us how we might embrace the word curmudgeon as feminists have "refashioned the term *crone* to connote a woman of a certain age, who has achieved a measure of wisdom and wishes to pass her experiences along to women in a younger generation." He lands on a note simultaneously somber and challenging, a call to action to mentor junior faculty to take risks, to push intellectual boundaries "to find their conscience, and be willing to dance" in the increasingly corporate world of higher education and social work training.

We hope these reflections spark an ongoing conversation about mentorship in the social work scholarship. Social work is a field where knowledge and training is explicitly conveyed through mentoring relationships from field-based education to professional supervision. It is also a field that grapples with many of the challenges that are eloquently described in this special section.

How might we, as a profession, offer more consistent, constructive and welcoming mentorship to members of underrepresented groups including men and racial minorities? How can we optimally teach our students about how to be a good mentor, how to seek out mentorship, and how to benefit from mentoring opportunities across a professional lifespan? With this special section on Mentoring in the Helping Professions, we also hope you will be moved to reflect upon your own mentoring relationships, both as a mentor and mentee and – as Johanna Slivinske does – to consider the contributions many mentors have made to your own personal and professional lives. Perhaps you will even be inspired to write to them and share that gratitude.

## References

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