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On Grand-Mentors and Great-Grand-Mentors: Reflecting on Graduate Program Support for a Multigenerational Mentorship Model


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Keywords

mosaic mentorship, doctoral program, graduate school

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Abstract

Doctoral programs often reflect a formal mentoring project wherein an advisor closely guides a junior scholar through degree completion. But the primary mentor-mentee relationship is only one of many relationships that blossoms during this time. ‘Mosaic’ mentorship models are becoming more common, leading to better outcomes for junior scholars. In this commentary, we reflect on one type of mosaic mentorship model wherein multiple ‘generations’ mentor more junior scholars (and mentor those who are doing the mentoring, too). The authors are five links in this continuing mentorship chain. Together we reflect on what made this style of mentorship a unique and positive experience, and how graduate programs can support their students by encouraging this model.

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Graduate programs in the social, behavioral, and health sciences – particularly doctoral programs – are largely considered to be a formal mentoring project (Byrne & Keefe, 2002; Creighton, Creighton, & Parks, 2010; Nettles & Mittlet, 2006). In the traditional university model of most institutions of higher learning in the United States and Western Europe (Altbach, 2011), a single academic faculty mentors one or many junior scholars who are enrolled in the degree-granting program, often referred to as an apprenticeship model. This mentor provides guidance and supervision for the junior scholars until degree completion, whereupon the junior scholar becomes faculty at another institution and reproduces the model ad infinitum (Johnson, 2015). This traditional, one-on-one or one-on-many mentor-mentee relationship has begun to lose favor, however, among certain institutions and academic disciplines. In its place has arisen a new model, wherein soon-to-be or

early-career academics are mentored by a handful of formal and informal mentors, chosen to be complementary in their skills, experiences, and approaches; this is sometimes referred to as ‘constellation’ mentoring, or ‘mosaic’ mentoring (Briscoe & Freeman, 2019; Commodore et al., 2016; Kanuka & Marini, 2004; Kram, 1988; Mullen & Lick, 1999). There appears to be good reason for this shift: Studies have found that trainees afforded a mosaic of multiple mentors feel more confident and prepared for their future careers (Davis, 2017) and have higher job satisfaction and more career success (Higgins, 2000; Nicholson et al., 2017). In mentoring research-bound undergraduate students, too, this model has gained traction (Nicholson et al., 2017).

In this commentary, we reflect on our collective experiences with one particular type of ‘mosaic’ mentorship: A *multi-generational mentorship model*. In this model, junior scholars are mentored by more

senior scholars, but simultaneously, the senior scholar is also being mentored by someone senior to them, and the junior scholar is also mentoring someone junior to them. In this way, multiple ‘generations’ are available to guide and advise those more junior to themselves. This type of arrangement has been described briefly in past mentoring commentaries (e.g., Seal, Smith, & Sun, 2019). However, this commentary focuses on a narrower version of this model, and specifically within the context of a doctoral training program. The program within NYU – the Psychology and Social Intervention, or PSI, program, of which Julia was a post-baccalaureate research assistant, Mackenzie was a doctoral student, Hiro was a faculty member, and Ed was the program director – provides the setting that structured our relationships and thus shaped our perspectives (see Figure 1).

Of note: the term ‘generational’ in this context does not refer to population demographic cohort labels (i.e., the Silent Generation, born between 1928 and 1945, or Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980). In describing the multigeneration mentorship model, we conceptualize differences in ‘generation’ as reflecting differences in seniority of academic status or role within a doctoral program. Though it is true that more senior mentors tend to be older in age than their more junior mentees, that is not always the case, and mentors may at times be the same age (or younger, or of the same demographic cohort) as their mentees.

Mentor-Mentee Experiences

Ed

Ed’s early development as a multigenerational mentor began when, in collaboration with his colleague Julian Rappaport, they created the *Educational Pyramid* (Seidman & Rappaport, 1974). Dr.

Rappaport and Ed simultaneously supervised and directed four different clinical training and research projects. In each of these projects, Ed and Dr. Rappaport advised two doctoral students who served as either research or clinical director for a project. These doctoral students supervised a group of 24 undergraduate students who were participating in a year-long course where they were mentored in a group format as nonprofessional *change agents* (in contemporary language, mentors). At its core, this Educational Pyramid was a multigenerational mentorship model.

Not only did many of the doctoral students go on to successful careers as clinicians and scholars, but so did many of the undergraduates they trained. Key elements at each level of the projects were active listening, encouragement and support, mutual respect for differing points of view and identity, and an action orientation. Maintaining these *constructive setting norms* (Seidman, 2012) within the mentoring relationships was critical. Ed was also aware that all students are not necessarily at the same developmental stage; thus, attention to challenging each mentee’s growth by just the right amount was also a central (if difficult) task, aided by the creation of a finely tuned developmental model for each mentor-mentee link. Moreover, knowledge that went beyond the bounds of clinical psychology was needed. Everyone was challenged to seek out expertise from scholars in other disciplines, as is common in mosaic mentoring. For example, doctoral students not only regularly had scholars in other disciplines on their dissertation committees, but at times also took law school courses to supplement their learning and broaden their lens as researchers.

Two decades later, Hiro joined Ed’s Adolescent Pathways Project team (Seidman, 1991) as a doctoral research assistant (RA). Early on, Ed recognized Hiro as a brilliant

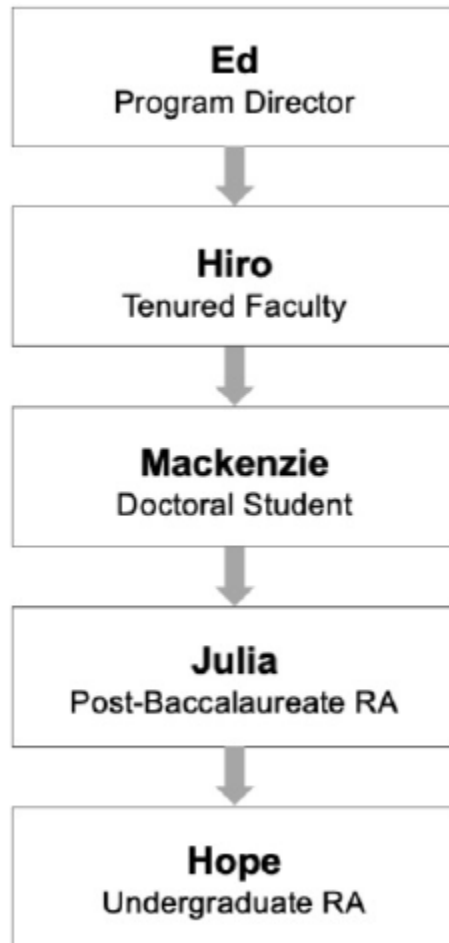


Figure 1. Multigenerational mentorship model.

writer and synthesizer of knowledge. It was clear that developmentally, all Ed had to do was get out of Hiro's way and support and encourage him in whatever he was interested in doing; that is, to be his "guide on the side" (Fischler & Zachary, 2000). Hiro quickly became an equal colleague in every sense of the term. All that was left to do was to encourage Hiro to pursue the next challenge, and in every case, he did from his novel dissertation on (Yoshikawa, 1998).

So, it should come as no surprise that Ed fought for the Psychology Department at NYU to hire Hiro as a faculty member. From that time, Hiro has been Ed's colleague in whatever context they have found

themselves. Watching Hiro mentor numerous students over the years, it was apparent to Ed that he was always sensitively attuned to the students' developmental stage, challenging them to pursue their own interests, and making sure they were exposed to a mosaic of diverse mentors, both peers and senior scholars. Many of these mentees have since gone on to pursue their own distinguished careers, as this article attests.

Hiro

Hiro's experience being mentored by Ed was one of encouragement and support, but also being pushed to consider new

opportunities and challenges. As an example, Ed suggested that Hiro apply for a full grant for his policy-oriented dissertation research (with Ed ‘ghosting’ as PI) (Yoshikawa & Seidman, 2001). This was certainly not something that Hiro thought was in the realm of possibility. However, it provided him with the invaluable experience of grant writing during the doctoral stage of his career. Ed also provided connections to other scholars in his network who served as secondary and in some cases career-long mentors, representing a ‘mosaic’ approach to mentorship by a group of varied, complementary scholars at the intersection of psychology, practice, and policy.

Mentorship by Ed extended beyond doctoral study and has continued throughout the rest of Hiro’s career. At the assistant professor level, for example, Ed provided guidance regarding the mix of extending an existing program of research and starting an entirely new one. As Ed expanded his own areas of experience – to include a stint as senior vice president of a major foundation – he passed on learnings from that experience to Hiro. Thus, the multigenerational mentorship patterns varied by career stage of both the mentor and the mentee.

Hiro has taken away from Ed’s mentorship several lessons that informed his approach to mentoring Mackenzie. First, he learned how a mentor can support a mentee whose research veers away from their own. Mackenzie’s area of research was not in an area that Hiro had been working in himself; nevertheless, he mentored her work in that area throughout her doctoral studies as she deepened a program of research focusing on infant feeding, maternal mental health, and policy (Whipps, 2020). Second, he benefited from Ed’s encouragement of network-based mentorship. In turn, he encouraged Mackenzie’s efforts to contact and collaborate with early-career professors and researchers in her area, as there were not such

natural collaborators within her home department. Finally, he explicitly created his own version of an Educational Pyramid within his lab to teach mentoring skills to his own advisees.

Mackenzie

Mackenzie was a part of that Educational Pyramid as one of Hiro’s first doctoral advisees in the PSI program. As a part of Mackenzie’s mixed-method dissertation, she supervised her own ‘lab within a lab,’ comprised of a diverse group of 12 undergraduate-, master’s-, and doctoral-level research assistants (RAs). These RAs recruited and interviewed new mothers from across the United States about infant feeding and their transitions to motherhood, transcribed and coded the qualitative data, and helped to analyze and report on the findings (Whipps et al., 2022). The training that Mackenzie received from Hiro – not only about how to conduct this kind of research herself, but also *how to teach others* about conducting qualitative research – was invaluable. Equally invaluable was how available (not to mention supportive, warm, and friendly) Hiro was towards Mackenzie’s RAs; students were invited and encouraged to attend the full lab’s meetings, to give input on a wide range of projects that were housed within the lab, and to gain new skills and competencies along the way.

Hiro was also carefully attuned to issues of power and identity within his lab group. This turned out to be incredibly important for Mackenzie as she navigated becoming a parent early in her graduate career (and as the first doctoral student in PSI to do so). Throughout, Hiro was unfailingly supportive and flexible, and used what institutional power he had to ensure that Mackenzie was able to take an appropriate maternity leave, return successfully to the program, and graduate without delay. Ed, too, as her grand-

mentor and most senior PSI faculty member, threw the full weight of his support behind Mackenzie during this challenging and wonderful time in her academic and personal life.

Mackenzie always felt supported and was also pushed to grow beyond what she thought she was capable of, echoing Hiro's experience as Ed's mentee. For example, Hiro strongly encouraged Mackenzie to first-author a book chapter in her first year of doctoral study (Whipps & Yoshikawa, 2016), to sole-author an empirical manuscript in her second year (Whipps, 2017), and to publish her comprehensive exam – a theory paper – in her fourth year (Whipps et al., 2018). Seeing her largely independent work published and subsequently cited by others was an enormous boost to her self-efficacy as an academic. Hiro also supported her interest in policy-practice partnerships, introducing her to major players in this space and encouraging her to use her clinical experience as a unique lens through which to view maternal-child health policies.

The 'lab within a lab' was also where Mackenzie met Julia, a recently graduated post-baccalaureate working on another project housed within PSI. Because the norms of the program encouraged mosaic mentoring, the project PI (another faculty member within PSI) enthusiastically supported Julia in becoming involved in Mackenzie's project, and thus encouraged Julia to gain skills and experience in qualitative research that were not a part of the project that she was hired to work on. All the better for Mackenzie and Hiro: Julia was clearly a star researcher and was rapidly promoted to lead interviewer and senior coder. Mackenzie recognized her skills and leadership potential, encouraging her to develop those skills within the lab setting as a mentor to newer and less self-assured RAs.

Julia

Julia benefited greatly from joining the PSI community and being invited into this Educational Pyramid. She was intent on exploring various research opportunities at PSI, and Mackenzie stepped in as a mentor who introduced Julia to new areas of research and the day-to-day experience of a PhD student. Julia's participation in Mackenzie's 'lab within a lab' became an essential steppingstone to the rest of her academic journey.

Mackenzie provided Julia with several opportunities to learn and grow, offering support and guidance while making space for independence and agency. In addition to teaching Julia about qualitative research, Mackenzie also invited Julia to work on a paper with her, Julia's first foray into the world of academic publishing (Whipps & Honoroff, 2019). Though Julia felt ill-equipped, Mackenzie showed no doubt that Julia was up to the task. Exposure to a fruitful mentorship model was so influential for Julia's confidence that she felt ready to pursue her PhD, and became part of a new lab where similar mentorship styles continue to set her up for success. Because of her experience with Mackenzie's research process, Julia has taken on a policy-centered mixed methods dissertation in another interdisciplinary doctoral program, for which she will conduct her own interviews with mothers. Julia has continued to work with Mackenzie on other scholarly endeavors, even as they both moved on from PSI.

What Made This Model Successful?

Reflecting on the development of these 'multigenerational' relationships provides unique insight into how mentorships can be created and sustained across careers,

disciplines, and the boundaries of institutions. Each mentoring relationship not only created impressive scholars and scholarship, but it also created a successful and sustainable mentorship model for each mentee to utilize and pass down. Specifically, we notice three main themes that contributed to the success of this approach.

First, this model found success in circumventing the difficult-to-navigate power dynamics that exist in academic spaces. This occurred in two ways: 1) encouraging ‘near-peer’ relationships, or in other words, shrinking the experience gap between mentors and mentees; and 2) creating a relationship that despite experience levels, is one of reciprocity and bidirectional learning. As we saw from Mackenzie and Julia’s experiences, students that would traditionally be viewed as only the mentee were encouraged to explore their own mentoring potential. This support, in part, is a result of learning from their own mentors about successful mentorship and feeling empowered from those relationships to pursue their own. For those relationships in which the experience gap is wider, each mentor described here created an environment in which the mentor was moved closer to the mentee and the mentee closer to the mentor. Rather than reinforcing power imbalances, mentors believed they had much to learn from their mentees as well, and engaged their mentees in active learning, partnership, and collaboration; at times when it was important, the mentor was prepared to change their role from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side” (Fischler & Zachary, 2000).

Second, these relationships did not end after graduation or career transitions. The relationships stayed intact, evolving and growing along with the mentors and mentees themselves. From the start, the relationships were future-directed (Fischler & Zachary, 2000). The goal of the mentor was not to

create their academic replica, but rather to help the mentee develop their own goals and direction. This in turn allowed the mentee to successfully transition into the next phase, and for the mentor and mentee to continue to grow together, leading to a sustainable relationship across multiple career pathways. For example, we see how Hiro created a lab space within his institution where involvement could be sustained beyond graduation and new complementary relationships could form. This he learned from Ed’s mentorship; there is an assumption that each person you mentor will at some point soon become an academic colleague, collaborator, and perhaps even a friend.

Third, we have experienced this model as valuing genuine care and empathy. Rather than a transactional model, the relationships were able to become personal in the sense that both parties felt valued, heard, and respected. Mentors strove to create a space of trust in which mentees felt able to express their own imagined futures, even if they looked different than the mentor’s. We see this occur in Julia’s relationship with Mackenzie, where she describes having the space to explore her various interests and feel comfortable sharing ideas, which in turn led her to feel ready to pursue a doctoral program and utilize this approach with Hope. We see this, too, in Mackenzie’s relationship with Hiro, and Hiro’s relationship with Ed. Though careers may take different trajectories, there is much to be gained from a continuation of the mentor-mentee relationship along these paths.

We show how this model has persisted across four ‘generations’ of scholars within PSI, but we also know this tree has many branches and lineages that have taken their own mentorship paths outside of the PSI program – as is the beauty of multi-generational mentorship models. One of these branches includes the mentor-mentee relationship of Julia and Hope. Julia was

encouraged by her advisors to recruit Hope, an undergraduate working in her lab, to help with a qualitative project for one of Julia's PhD milestones. Julia guided Hope in integrating methods, theory, and policy to analyze qualitative accounts of mothers with young children who were participating in a sectoral workforce development program (a project that Hiro is another lead investigator on; Sommer et al., 2018). Given Julia's experience at PSI, it is no surprise that Julia and Hope's mentor-mentee relationship was natural and productive. Julia learned to love mentoring, and Hope became an essential and impressive partner in the data analysis process.

When Hope started working as an RA for Julia's dissertation project, she was unsure of her place in academic research. Academia can be a difficult space to navigate, but with the support and guidance of Julia, she was able to appreciate different research approaches. What were once abstract and theoretical coursework concepts became more easily understood through working with Julia. Instead of being pigeonholed within one single area of research, Hope was able to explore and apply new learning to diverse policies that she was passionate about with her own "guide at the side" (Fischler & Zachary, 2000).

For Hope, it was easy to self-doubt and worry about judgment from mentors, especially as an undergraduate. However, it was clear that Julia respected and trusted Hope and would help advance her thinking in supportive and productive ways. This in turn expanded Hope's perspective on future careers and opportunities, and she began to realistically see herself building a career in academia for the first time. Upon graduating, Hope took a position as a project coordinator, where she is continuing to explore her research interests and goals.

How Doctoral Programs Can Support This Model

We believe that doctoral programs can better support students by building *constructive setting norms* (Seidman, 2012) that take advantage of multigenerational mentorship. One such norm would be to encourage (or require) a mosaic mentorship model, wherein students are mentored by at least two, and preferably more, faculty in the department early in their graduate program. The PSI program had such a requirement from the very outset. Additionally, senior PSI students were paired with incoming students in a near-peer 'buddy system' to help newer students acclimate to the program and succeed. We feel that these norms led to a 'mentoring mindset' in the program and department, and that as a result, students and faculty have shown more flexibility, courage, and initiative in help-seeking and help-giving behaviors. It has also allowed multigenerational mentorship to emerge organically within many of the faculty labs and encouraged doctoral students to pursue mentoring experiences with more junior students, as was the case with Mackenzie, Julia, and Hope. This setting norm is particularly important for interdisciplinary programs. Each of the scholars profiled above was, and remains, acutely interested in exploring the intersections of research, policy, and practice. We have found that research which defies rigid disciplinary boundaries often requires flexible and dynamic models of mentorship, as discussed by Ed and Hiro.

Another setting norm that is important to successfully implement a multigenerational mentorship model, or any mosaic mentorship model, is to explicitly prepare both mentors and mentees for what is expected of them within the program. In particular, learning

how and why to build accurate developmental models for each mentor-mentee relationship will help each mentee develop to their fullest potential. Each mentor here adapted, and continues to adapt, different strategies based on the mentee's developmental stage, aiming to push each mentee just a bit out of their comfort zone. We believe that this preparatory work should occur as early as feasible in the doctoral career of students to be most helpful, certainly within the first two years of the doctoral program. Some options for teaching mentoring skills include: required coursework that makes use of already-available university funding streams; optional graduate internship programs (e.g., Reddick et al., 2012); or opportunities for faculty and graduate students to co-construct and co-teach an undergraduate course (e.g., Finch & Fernández, 2014).

Finally, program faculty and administrators should recognize that their doctoral programs are (hopefully) creating future colleagues. Mackenzie remembers visiting the department during an interview day before being accepted to the program, and hearing that even if those in attendance did not complete this program, that current faculty expected that we would nonetheless be working together soon as academic collaborators. This message stuck with her and sustained her through the early struggles to find her academic voice. Moreover, it belied the fact that PSI was committed to actively flattening the strict hierarchies – and the large power imbalances that accompany these hierarchies – that exist in many graduate programs. Ultimately, empowering one's students to grow as scholars and build an independent program of research is the goal of doctoral programs in the social, behavioral, and health sciences. We believe that multigenerational mentorship, when done well, is one avenue to achieve that goal.

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