Perceived Benefits of Mentoring in Pediatric Psychology: A Qualitative Approach

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Objective To identify tangible and intangible benefits of mentoring cited by a select group of identified mentors. Methods Twenty frequently named mentors within pediatric psychology provided responses to open-ended questions regarding benefits they have experienced through the mentoring process. Results Mentors identified many personal and professional benefits of the mentoring relationship, although they did not clearly distinguish between tangible and intangible advantages to the relationship. The most commonly reported benefits included career development of the mentee, mentor’s career enhancement, and a sense of giving back to the field of pediatric psychology. Conclusions A bidirectional definition of mentoring more accurately describes the relationship than a more traditional unidirectional definition. These results suggest that mentors experience a wide variety of benefits that could be examined more closely within the field.

Key words professional and training issues; qualitative methods; research design and methods.

Introduction

Mentorship is a common practice in many professional realms. Despite its frequent use, the term mentoring lacks a clear definition with regard to role and function (Bray & Nelson, 2007), perhaps due to variations across disciplines, theory, and perspectives. However, several authors have attempted to define this term. For example, Moore and Amey (1988) posited that mentoring is “a form of professional socialization whereby a more experienced individual acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and patron of a less experienced protégé…to further develop and refine the protégé’s skills, abilities, and understanding” (p. 45). Others have offered similar definitions that highlight mentoring as a process focused on providing the mentee or protégé with the opportunity for professional benefits and gains (e.g., Blackwell, 1989). Although reciprocity has occasionally been mentioned, the practice of mentoring has typically been viewed as a unidirectional relationship focused more on benefits to the mentee (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997).

Previous empirical research focused on the effects on the mentor has highlighted the costs associated with mentoring trainees, specifically identifying time and work demands (Allen et al., 1997; Ganser, 1996). Similarly, advanced career mentors have noted that there are often tasks that interfere and compete with time that can be devoted to mentoring others (Forehand, 1993; Ganser, 1996). Ragins and Scandura (1999) described a cost/benefits framework for mentorship, stipulating that while mentors put significant resources into their mentoring relationships, they also gain from these interactions. Experience may play a role in evaluation of the costs and benefits of mentoring, with more experienced mentors having perhaps a more realistic picture of a mentoring relationship.
relationship. These experienced mentors may anticipate more benefits and fewer costs from mentoring and may be more likely to enter into new mentorship relationships (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Although mentorship entails a significant investment in terms of time and energy on the part of the mentor, the advantages of making such a commitment are relatively unexplored (Forehand, 1993).

Despite the unidirectionality in mentorship definitions and research to date, several authors have suggested that mentors may experience substantial benefits from these relationships. For example, a survey of mentors in a professional setting identified tangible benefits associated with mentoring, such as correlations with higher salary, promotion rate, and ratings of subjective career success (Allen et al., 1997). Additionally, mentors may receive intangible career-related benefits, such as support and encouragement and an increase in knowledge (Allen et al., 1997), which may be particularly valuable in the academic realm (Ganser, 1996). Academic and professional mentoring may also have social advantages for the mentor, such as creating a loyal support base and leading to increased recognition and approval by peers (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Success as a mentor may also increase the mentor’s visibility in his or her professional realm (Allen et al., 1997). Additionally, mentors may be especially likely to select mentees with whom they perceive goodness of fit, be it personally or professionally (Forehand, 2008). Thus, mentors may develop close friendships with these individuals and subsequently receive return favors from their mentees (Allen et al., 1997).

Erikson’s notion of generativity—the idea that older adults seek to create a legacy for themselves that will survive after their death—has also been proposed as a potential model for mentorship. Levinson (1978) suggested that, as adults reach the approximate middle of their lives, they may obtain satisfaction from sharing their wisdom and acquired skills. The desire to build a competent workforce and benefit one’s organization has also been cited as reasons to become a mentor (Allen et al., 1997). For example, an established professor mentoring and investing his/her resources in an early career professional may be a mechanism for a more advanced mentor to solidify his/her legacy (Ragins & Scandura, 1999) and feel a sense of Erikson’s notion of generativity. This desire to pass information on to others as well as to have an influence on others has also been identified by mentors as reasons to enter into mentoring relationships (Allen et al., 1997).

Despite this early support for the notion that mentors may also benefit from the mentoring relationship, such reflections have not spurred much investigation of the advantages of mentoring, and this concept of reciprocal benefits of mentoring has typically gone unstudied in most disciplines. This area of research remains in the nascent stage in the discipline of professional psychology, particularly within pediatric psychology. However, mentoring has long been identified as an important element in the training of pediatric psychologists (e.g., Routh, 1980; Spirito et al., 2003). In 2004, the Society of Pediatric Psychology (SPP) recognized the need for formal mentoring relationships within the field and developed a mentorship program for its members, which currently has over 300 participants (SPP, n.d.). One mentor in the SPP mentoring program did note benefits in the form of “giving back” to pediatric psychology as a whole (Packard, 2006). The division has developed an additional program for “mentored reviews” of manuscripts submitted to the Journal of Pediatric Psychology (SPP, n.d.). Recent work by Wu, Nassau, and Drotar (2011) reported a high level of satisfaction with the mentored reviews program, and both mentors and mentees reported a range of benefits gained from participation in the program; however, these relationships may not meet the intensity of mentoring relationships typically discussed in most of the mentoring literature.

The emphasis within the field, not surprisingly, has been on the benefits and needs of students and early career professionals. However, the tangible and intangible personal gains experienced by mentors within the field of pediatric psychology have not been examined empirically. The present study utilized qualitative methodology to further understand the process of mentorship as a “dynamic, reciprocal” relationship in which mentors gain from the experience as well as mentees (Busch, 1985; Forehand, 2008, p. 475). It was hypothesized that mentors would identify both personal and professional benefits associated with mentoring, as well as intangible and tangible benefits. This study aims to contribute to the limited literature surrounding mentorship in the field of pediatric psychology and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of this critical aspect of psychological training and professional development.

Method

Previous research by Aylward and colleagues (Aylward, Odar, Kessler, Canter, & Roberts, 2011, manuscript under review) has allowed for a graphical illustration and empirical examination of mentor and mentee relationships in the field of pediatric psychology and highlighted several
individuals as highly identified mentors in the field. The present study utilized the identification of mentors by Aylward et al., (2011, manuscript under review) and surveyed the top 25 most frequently named mentors. This was achieved by computing the number of times each individual was cited by others in the field. The actual number of identified mentors exceeded 25 (n = 31) because several individuals were tied (i.e., were cited by the same number of people).

Identified mentors were solicited via email. Participants indicated informed consent by clicking a link that redirected them to a brief, online survey regarding their own experiences as a mentor. Since the present study is exploratory by nature, the survey consisted of several open-ended questions that allowed mentors to discuss tangible and intangible benefits accrued from the mentoring. Specifically, the survey consisted of the following questions: (1) “What tangible benefits, if any, have you gained from serving as a mentor?” (2) “Additionally, some mentors have noted indirect benefits in terms of their continued learning from their students. What, if any, benefits have you gained in terms of your learning or personal and professional growth?” and (3) “Are there other positive aspects of being a mentor that your responses to the two previous questions did not address? If so, please describe below.” Questions were intentionally left broad and open ended in order to encourage responses that reflected all perceived benefits. Identical procedures were used to code all responses regardless of how the respondent initially categorized the response. Additionally, for each item, participants were told to describe as many aspects or benefits as they wished, but not feel obligated to fill all the provided boxes. All study procedures were approved by the primary author’s Institutional Review Board.

Twenty mentors responded to the solicitation by following the provided link to a web-based survey site (Qualtrics), reflecting a participation rate of 65%. The majority of the current sample was male (75%; n = 15). Nine of the named mentors described themselves as primarily involved in a combination of both research and clinical/applied activities, nine as primarily involved in clinical/applied activities, and two as primarily involved in academic and research activities. Of the 18 respondents who provided the year when they received their doctorates, 2 received doctorates in the 1960s, 6 received doctorates in the 1970s, 6 received doctorates in the 1980s, and 4 received doctorates in the 1990s. The mean number of years since receiving the doctorate was 30.33 years (SD = 9.51). This number is similar to that of the overall sample of mentors originally solicited for participation (M = 29.86 years, SD = 8.17).

Qualitative participant responses were open coded by the authors to identify common themes in perceived benefits received from mentoring. All responses were coded in a group format by three study authors. Given the exploratory nature of the present study, themes and coding schemes were generated during the coding process and could not be established prior to viewing participant responses. The remaining study authors then coded items independently using the codes developed during the initial group coding. Discrepancies were discussed until all items were coded to consensus. For all items that represented multiple themes, one theme was readily identified by all study authors as more dominant than others. This dominant theme was assigned as the primary code and additional secondary codes were also assigned for additional themes. Initial analyses utilized only the primary code for each response and separate analyses were conducted to examine frequency of secondary codes. Given the original research goal of identifying different types of benefits for mentors, each theme was then coded as either tangible or intangible.

**Results**

Participants provided 155 descriptions of personal benefits resulting from mentoring. The number of responses provided varied by respondent from 2 to 20 responses each (M = 7.7 responses, SD = 4.9). The coding process yielded 15 themes: collaboration, research dissemination, research tasks, development of mentee, professional development, fulfillment of need for intellectual stimulation, development of the mentor’s department or program, development of the field, intrinsic satisfaction, professional networking, personal growth, personal relationships, clinical service improvements, and learning about the next generation or keeping with the field. Table 1 provides a brief description of each coding theme and the frequency count of responses corresponding to each theme. Examples based directly from participant responses (but slightly altered to maintain anonymity and confidentiality) were generated. The table presents themes in order of frequency at which they were described by mentors. A small number of responses (n = 16) were judged to represent more than one coding scheme, and, therefore, were coded as illustrative of two themes. Consensus could not be achieved regarding six (3.87%) of the responses, most frequently due to the vague nature of the response.
Table I. Benefits Named by Mentors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description and examples</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Tangible/ intangible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field development</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill development</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about the next generation of psychologists/ keeping current with new developments in the field</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic satisfaction</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>I&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of research tasks</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal relationships</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research dissemination</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual stimulation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional networking</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of mentor’s own department or program</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical service improvements</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>T&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: I, Intangible; T, Tangible.<br><br><sup>a</sup>Indicates the most predominant code for categories that included both tangible and intangible responses.
Although participants were provided distinct areas for providing open-ended descriptions of tangible and intangible benefits separately, it was found that the distinction between responses in each set of fields was not always clear. Of the 15 themes identified from participant responses, 5 (33.33%) of the code categories were characterized as primarily tangible benefits (research dissemination, research tasks, professional development, development of the mentor’s department or program, and development of skills) representing 34.14% of all items. Eight (53.33%) code categories were considered primarily intangible benefits (mentee development, intellectual stimulation, development of the field, intrinsic satisfaction, professional networking, personal growth, personal relationships, learning about the next generation of psychologists, and remaining current with the field) representing 56.71% of all items. Two (13.33%) of the themes (collaboration and clinical service improvements) included responses describing both tangible and intangible benefits, representing 9.15% of all items. Individual respondents tended to provide responses that fit into both code types, regardless of whether they provided responses to both questions. Tangible responses were reported less frequently than intangible responses ($M = 2.30, SD = 1.78$); in fact, four participants reported no tangible responses at all. However, all participants identified at least one intangible gain associated with providing mentoring ($M = 4.05, SD = 2.76$). Seventeen responses were either coded into a category that represented both tangible and intangible benefits or had primary and secondary codes that indicated one tangible and one intangible theme (over half of these responses were provided by only two participants).

When overall frequencies of themes were recalculated to include both primary and secondary codings, minimal changes in the rankings of most frequently cited benefits were found in comparison to rankings established with use of only primary codings. Nine themes (60%) maintained the same ranking in both calculations, while four themes (26.67%) changed only one position in their ranking. Only two themes (13.33%) changed their positions by two rankings (research dissemination and intellectual stimulation), as these two categories had the highest number of secondary codes (three responses each). Given the little variation in ranking between use of both primary and secondary codes and use of just primary codes, discussion of findings will focus only on primary codes for the purposes of presentation.

**Discussion**

The present study identified a rich variety of themes regarding benefits gained from mentoring relationships. The responses generated by named mentors clearly highlight the reciprocity that is implicit in the mentoring relationship. Since the study was exploratory by nature, the large number of themes is significant because it highlights the vast array of both personal and professional benefits accrued from the mentoring experience. Personal benefits named include feelings of intrinsic satisfaction, development of personal relationships, and personal growth, such as development of personal views and beliefs. Professional benefits named included awards, promotions, financial compensation, development of a professional relationship network, opportunities for collaboration, and research production and dissemination. This clearly demonstrates a greater complexity to mentoring than the one-sided transmission of knowledge, skills, and interactions that is commonly used to define the term mentoring.

Initially, it was hypothesized that named advantages of mentoring would be divisible into tangible and intangible benefits. Upon completion of the coding process, this did not appear to be the case. The division into tangible and intangible benefits may be a superficial one for coding given that the mentors intermingled their responses when asked explicitly to provide tangible or intangible benefits, sometimes crossing these categories, but these were noted in order to convey the complexity of the respondents’ recognition of received rewards. Although the distinction between the two was not always clear, it is apparent from the responses that mentors experience both distinct, identifiable benefits (such as financial compensation, completion of discrete tasks, etc.) and more subtle, abstract advantages (such as personal growth, positive feelings, learning, etc.) from the mentoring process.

Respondents easily pointed to discrete aspects of different mentoring relationships that resulted in appreciable products. Mentors gained through their enhanced ability to develop their research programs, learned new methodological tools from mentees, strengthened clinical practice, and garnered support for tasks such as analysis and writing. The multitude of benefits identified by these highly cited mentors reflect the importance of trainees and other mentees as a valuable resource for mentors as well as...
vice versa. Although mentorship has traditionally been viewed as a one-way relationship, these results emphasize the reciprocity inherent in mentoring relationships experienced by pediatric psychologists.

Recall that one model proposed for mentoring relationships is a costs/benefits model, in which parties “give and take” from one another (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). It is clear that mentoring relationships often lead to tangible gains for mentees, who are able to learn from and work with more experienced, more accomplished individuals. It is logical that mentors may seek some type of tangible return from this. In academic realms, particularly where research is highly valued, the acquisition of new statistical tools or the ability to heighten productivity appear to be valuable and desired. It is feasible that mentees bring skills and assistance to their mentors that would be otherwise unobtainable. Similarly, in clinical settings mentors may receive financial compensation or other returns for their efforts. However, benefits in this setting are less apparent from the current results (as discussed further below). Importantly, more abstract, less tangible (or product oriented) benefits were also identified at a high rate such as intellectual stimulation, sense of satisfaction, and fulfillment of Erikson’s generativity. In fact, mentors themselves noted at least as many intangible advantages as tangible, suggesting that research focused solely on financial compensation, publications, and other forms of tangible profit may be neglecting important motivating factors for mentors.

Interestingly, even when mentors were asked to name benefits for themselves, the most frequently cited benefit was professional, personal, or skills development of the mentee. This finding perhaps speaks to the commitment and investment that mentors have in their mentees. Mentors may derive a sense of personal satisfaction or fulfillment upon seeing his/her mentee go on and find success in his/her own right. For example, one mentor cited “pride in seeing mentees succeed” as a primary benefit of the mentoring experience. This finding supports that emergence of Erikson’s notion of generativity as a primary reason why mentoring relationships exist within mentoring literature in other disciplines (Allen et al., 1997; Levinson, 1978). It is logical that mentors who have already obtained significant success would gain satisfaction from the success of those they have helped.

Similarly, mentors also frequently described the development of the field of pediatric psychology or their department as benefits received from their mentoring of others. Again, Erikson’s generativity is apparent here. Mentors may see this “giving back” as one way to leave a legacy. Furthermore, mentors’ connectedness to the profession, colleagues, and mentees may make it difficult for them to consider their own personal benefits and professional advancements as distinct from those of the larger whole. Responses were frequently indicative of a desire to ensure that well-trained, talented psychologists continue to enter the field and make positive contributions. There seems to be an intrinsic satisfaction that comes with giving back in ways that extend beyond any one person’s individual contributions.

The present study contributes valuable information to the field on the variety of benefits that mentors perceive from their relationships with mentees and highlights that such benefits occur in many personal and professional domains. However, very few participants discussed clinical skills, with only three responses indicating clinical service improvements as a benefit of mentoring. Although several responses mentioned more general themes of collaboration and development of the field, those that did specify domains for this collaboration noted areas related to academic and research, rather than clinical, growth. This may signify that benefits of mentoring are less likely to be experienced in this area of professional service. It is possible that supervised experience is more influential in the development of clinical skills and that clinical mentoring relationships are structured in such a way to encourage unidirectionality (i.e., from mentor to mentee) more so than are research or more general professional mentoring relationships. However, these findings may also be a limitation of the sample used in the present study. Although it is possible that the mentors surveyed represented a more research-focused sample, only two of our participants identified as strictly researchers. The majority identified themselves as both researchers and clinicians. Additionally, it is possible that clinical skill development is viewed as separate from research and academic mentoring, perhaps falling more within the realm of supervision, and thus was not sufficiently tapped using the current survey questions. Future research should investigate whether professionals who obtain a certain level of success value contributions benefiting their research more than those benefiting clinical skills.

Another potential limitation of the present study is that the sample may have been more representative of mentors in later stages of their career, rather than all mentors in the field. The type of person to be named frequently in a project (Aylward et al., 2011, manuscript under review) is likely to be more senior due to the gradual
accretion of mentees. For example, the average number of years since the named mentors’ doctorates was 30 years in the present study. It is possible that the advantages and motivations for entering into mentoring relationships may vary over the course of one’s career as a mentor. The frequency with which mentors reported “giving back” as a benefit may suggest that mentoring is an institution that is likely to continue to thrive with little external motivation needed. However, whereas the present results indicate that well-established mentors within the field perceive a number of advantages associated with their role, it is not clear from these results that mentors earlier in their career perceive the same benefits. The format and scope of the present study did not allow for in-depth exploration of this possibility. Given the potential for these differences, future research should investigate differences in benefits perceived by mentors at various stages in their career. New information regarding the advantages experienced by early career mentors and the differences that emerge with more established professionals may shed light on what is needed to encourage a new generation of mentors.

Additionally, while one can become a mentor at any time in their careers, some professional placements may be more likely to position somebody to serve in mentorship roles for which they would gain recognition. This study was intended to elucidate what frequently named mentors in the field perceive from the mentoring process. In future research, however, it will be important to examine differences that may exist in perceptions of the mentoring relationship within the different settings and roles in which pediatric psychologists interact and among mentors at all stages of their careers.

The present study aimed to provide a more complete picture of what occurs in mentoring relationships beyond a unidirectional or linear relationship of mentor to mentee. These findings indicate that mentors are very much aware of the sometimes overt and sometimes more subtle manifestations of reciprocal influence and gains. Despite the costs that may be associated with mentoring, highly cited mentors identified advantages in both personal and professional domains from their mentoring relationships. The present results, deriving from a pediatric psychology sample of mentors, are consistent with conceptualization and research in other fields, including business and management (e.g., Allen et al., 1997). Clearly, benefits may motivate mentors to continue to engage in such relationships with mentees. This involvement from mentors is essential to the continued development of the field and training of future pediatric psychologists. For pediatric psychology the process of serving as a recognized mentor clearly results in multiple identified benefits, some tangible, some less discernable, but still distinctive to the mentor.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

References


