Mentoring: Reflections on Becoming an Academic Great-Grandparent

December 01, 2004

Like ships passing in the night (or more like academic conference-goers rushing through a crowded hotel lobby), I recently met my first academic great-grandchild. The encounter was fleeting, the exchange very brief: “I’m a former student of X (one of my first PhD students) and this is my graduate student Y.” Quickly doing the genealogical math in my head, I blurted out something incredibly banal along the lines of: “So you’re my great-grandchild – how nice to meet you.” Later, walking with my dinner group on our way to some imminently forgettable meal, I began thinking wistfully about the lost opportunity to find out more about this person, to see if there were recognizable signs supporting the existence of some kind of academic DNA. That led to thoughts about my other great-grandchildren as yet unmet, about the likelihood of soon having great-great-grandchildren, and about the role that mentoring plays in all of our lives.

Most days I don’t give a great deal of conscious thought to mentoring. I’m never asked to sketch my extended academic family tree when I fill out my annual reports for my university, and I can’t remember being asked to do this for others when writing their promotion and tenure letters. Of course, I do get asked to enumerate the thesis committees I serve on and chair, but that’s a different issue – saying nothing about whether these students go on to have the kinds of academic/scientific careers where they train others who go on to have similar careers mentoring others, and so on (and on).

Nonetheless, I spend an enormous amount of my professional time engaged in mentoring. The exploits and accomplishments of my current students and my students past (and of their students) are sources of extraordinary pride and enjoyment. Every year, I have a multi-generational laboratory dinner at a research conference I have been attending since I was a graduate student. Watching the interactions at these gatherings of my students past and present, along with the growing roster of students-of-students, has provided some of the most gratifying and profoundly touching moments of my academic career.

Born or Made

When my students are successful in any walk of professional life, it is tempting to think that my mentoring played an important role. Yet somewhere in the dark recesses off to the side of this rosy sense of mentorial efficacy is another more humbling thought. Perhaps I did nothing other than serve as a temporary conduit through which hugely gifted and ambitious students passed on their way to future successes that were based wholly on their own preexisting talents, abilities, and efforts. I am reminded of the sobering review by Christensen and Jacobson (Psychological Science, 1994) that concluded that there is no compelling evidence of a relationship between the amount or type of training therapists receive and the effectiveness of the services they provide. But what may be true in the training of therapists surely can’t be true in the training of scientists, right?

I have a vivid memory of a faculty meeting several years back devoted to considering changes in our
graduate curriculum. After fumbling around for a bit, adjusting and moving around the various course requirements, someone suggested we should first identify the goals we were trying to achieve and then use these to guide our curricular tweaking. One goal that emerged immediately was that of training scientists who would go on to successful academic careers. Thinking back over my own training, I was having trouble connecting any particular courses, requirements, or curricular sequencing to the fact that I ended up pursuing an academic career. I posed the question to the group of assembled psychological scientists (representing all areas of psychology) of whether they felt they were predominately “self-invented” or “trained.” In that particular group, on that particular day, everyone indicated that the scientist they became was more a result of self-invention than of formal training.

Reviews of the therapist training literature and anecdotes about scientists’ views on self-creation are best viewed as cautionary notes. Neither specifically deals with mentoring, which once again is strangely missing from the equation. Most likely, in the alchemy of creating scientists, the gifts and abilities an individual brings to the mix greatly matter, as do the drive and ambition to develop one’s skills and competencies. Courses, theses, educational milestones and the like probably help some, if only to provide a structured environment for bringing minds, methods, and substantive content together for a sustained period of intimate contact. Mentoring is at the very least the straw that stirs the drink and most probably is quite a bit more.

A Delicate Balance

My guess is that the ideal mentoring for training scientists who will go on to train other productive scientists (and ultimately create lots of academic great-and great-great-grandchildren) is one that strikes a delicate balance between teaching, training, and subtle molding on the one hand and fostering an independence of spirit and voice and a strong sense of owning a meaningful part of the scientific landscape on the other. It is a difficult balance to strike, but it can be done. (I think my own mentors Hans Strupp and Leslie Phillips were exemplary in this regard.)

In psychological science there are many remarkable multi-generational pedigrees that I expect many of you are a part of and that are sources of great pride and pleasure. If you would like to share some of your own ideas and experiences about the mentoring enterprise (both of mentoring and being mentored from the perspective of both “parent” and “child”) please send them to rlevenson@psychologicalscience.org.