

MENTORING GRADUATE STUDENTS:  
GOING BEYOND THE FORMAL ROLE STRUCTURE\*

ALLAN SCHNAIBERG  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY  
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY  
EVANSTON, IL 60201

JUNE 9, 2005

\*Prepared for *The American Sociologist*. The evaluations and suggestions of many of my former students are gratefully acknowledged. They have both greatly improved this analysis, and affirmed to me the rewards of my relationships with them.

MENTORING GRADUATE STUDENTS:  
GOING BEYOND THE FORMAL ROLE STRUCTURE

**I. FACULTY AND GRADUATE STUDENTS: GOING BEYOND  
FORMAL ROLES**

**A. THE MAKING OF A MENTOR**

When Silver and Shulman (2004) wrote their initial reconstruction of the limits of their graduate education, I paid special attention to it. Partly, this was because I was a faculty member during their graduate work in my department. . In the case of Silver, I was also a formal member of his dissertation committee. In this regard, this paper is a full (albeit thin) account of my role as a faculty member interacting with one of “my” graduate students. With Shulman, I had informally discussed his dissertation ideas. In addition, he had been my teaching assistant, and he shared considerable information about his teaching ideas with me as well. Yet I could not label myself as occupying a formal role of major adviser to him.

The above account is a valid one, in terms of the formal organization of my graduate department. Yet it taps very little of my informal relationships as a mentor for graduate students. I consider myself a mentor to both of these former students, and indeed, even somewhat more in the case of Shulman than of Silver. My distinction between roles and relationships draws upon the classification of Everett Wilson, in his distinctions between “rules, roles, and relationships”. I believe that our faculty members have quite different mixes of these activities (and had them earlier, when Silver and Shulman were students). An interesting description, which fails to distinguish between the two approaches, is the following Northwestern University graduate school publication [[TSQ 2001:1]:

Professor Schnaiberg always described the difference between undergraduate and

graduate education as the difference between a 'transaction' and a 'relationship.' He was right on the money," Pellow says. "Graduate students must develop relationships with professors in order to make it over the many hurdles that institutions put before them." Similarly, Carn-Watkins says of Lenore Blum, "She is held in the highest esteem by her students who view her as a role model and respond to her unfailing interest and investment in their intellectual and personal development.

But a member of my department demurred from this position, noting that "mentoring is about individual relationships, but it is also about designing a supportive infrastructure," This colleague then cited Sociology's intricate mentoring system:

"structured advising for students at all levels, teaching technique mentoring, and placement advising. Students also get an inside view of academia by serving on faculty committees and learn the ropes of presenting, and publishing scholarly work through joint faculty/student projects. "

Indeed, I realize that I have shifted my own mixture of activities with graduate students over the 36 years I have taught here. I gradually developed relationships with students only after I became a full professor (1975), during a period in which I became chair of my department. In my early teaching years, I taught the main graduate research methods course. There I followed the rules of preparing students for the demands they would face in doing their thesis research, and in their future research.

During this period, though, I also developed a sense for my role as a graduate adviser, helping students complete their research requirements for the Ph.D. I should emphasize helping here: I believe I selected many students who were struggling in the program. This included minority students, and others who were ambivalent about their future as a

researcher. Within this role, I was directive about what students ought to do to complete their work ñ but I had limited contact with their lives while they were in graduate school. Ironically, after these students entered the sociological marketplace, I often resented their continuing demands for me to write glowing letters on their behalf, and/or to suggest alternative workplaces where I had professional contacts (since they often had very limited professional success).

In neither of the interactions above would I now define myself as mentoring these students. I only started mentoring students when I was less anxious about my own academic status. Interestingly, one of the first students I had a mentoring relationship with noted (in response to an early draft of this paper):

I didn't know that I was your first student--you were so good at mentoring that I assumed you were an old pro.† Looking back ... I realize that you were a young man then and still finding your way.†[personal communication]

In our early years, grad students are close to us in age, and may even pose an academic equivalent of sibling rivalry. I also think that withdrawing from teaching the required graduate research methods course allowed me more freedom to enlarge my spheres of interaction with graduate students. As I reflect on my past experiences and observations in two graduate programs, however, I induce that age and seniority generally play an important role in developing mentoring capacity. This is congruent with theories of human development (e.g. Erickson 1974). In his Middle Adulthood stage, from 40 to 65 years, Erickson notes that the major life developmental task is generativity (vs. stagnation).

In this stage generativity refers to the adult's ability to care for another person. The most important event in this stage is parenting. Does the adult have the ability to care for and

guide the next generation? Generativity has a broader meaning than just raising children, however. Each adult must have some way to satisfy and support the next generation. According to Erikson, "A person does best at this time to put aside thoughts of death and balance its certainty with the only happiness that is lasting: to increase, by whatever is yours to give, the goodwill and higher order in your sector of the world"

[Erikson, 1974, cited in

HYPERLINK "<http://web.cortland.edu/andersmd/ERIK/stage7.HTML>"

<http://web.cortland.edu/andersmd/ERIK/stage7.HTML>]

For me, mentoring involves a relationship, in which the student and I discuss the professional world "out there". I provide them with information about how to use their remaining time in graduate school, and how to prepare themselves for the options they face "beyond the Ph.D." This is the social context in the sociological graduate program for the faculty to express their own generativity. The age range of Erickson's middle adulthood is 40-65 years. In this age period, faculty typically have tenure and promotion to full Professor.

Genuine mentoring involves a far deeper relationship with a student than is the role of "advising" the student. In order for the relationship to be sustained, both the mentor and the mentee have to be somewhat more revealing about themselves. For example, when students anguish about what their future tenure experiences will be like, I talk about how much strain I felt, even when promotions were less burdensome to achieve. I also reassure them at times by recounting the success of many of "my" former students (often at places that don't have the research priorities that my department has). Moreover, I am open with them about why faculty in our department were rejected in their tenure reviews, since this often substantially raises graduate student anxiety. Paradoxically, this is heightened by the fact that those rejected for tenure disproportionately advise and even

mentor students.

Equally important, though, is the requirement that students also reveal their own feelings, identities, desires, and weaknesses. Because students gradually heard that I was the “court of last resort”, I have often met with students frustrated with some grievance about some faculty or department only once. I do my best to listen to them, but neither they nor I are especially revealing in these brief interactions. This activity is following neither the role of adviser, nor the relationship of mentoring. It approximates a departmental ombudsman role (which is different from a graduate advising person or thesis committee).

Graduate student attempts to create a mentoring relationship require them and their mentor to consider the lived realities of graduate education. Some of these are apparent in the formal rules and roles of departments, and common to many graduate departments. I outline some of these below. How these rules and roles impact on graduate students, however, is dependent on the complex dimensions of each student’s life. And whether or how they can/should be mentored is problematic, since each faculty role occupant differs in their own knowledge, mastery, and motivation.

What makes a genuine mentoring relationship less frequent is that such relationships are not generally supported by departments. Most universities support advising rather than mentoring: students are raw material to be directed by faculty (Colley 2002, 2003). Helen Moore and Bruce Keith (1992) argue and empirically the idea that the professional achievements of Sociology graduate students fit a “tournament” model, more than a “contest” between students. Students’ backgrounds are the backdrop for the collective production of young professionals, and embedded within this production process is a number of departmental supports, including “mentoring” (Keith & Moore, 1995; Keith et

al. 2002). Even in the more structural tournament model, though, mentors have an opportunity cost for mentoring students (instead using students to help in their research, or simply using the faculty member's time to produce research). Under these conditions, it is not surprising that genuine mentoring is not common. This structural restraint means that students get a hit-and-miss amalgam of advice casually offered by faculty (and peers). The problem often is that this advice is only helpful for students who perfectly fit the department's template (which is usually a variant on each faculty member cloning themselves). For the faculty advisers are heavily oriented towards expanding their own professional reputation (what Erickson calls "stagnation").

In my department, success of our students has been defined as them getting a tenure-track appointment at a major research university. Any deviation from this ideal-typical goal leaves faculty relatively uninterested in the student's graduate career (one of my former colleagues labeled all such students as "marginal", and stated publicly that faculty who chose to work with them were also "marginal"). Paradoxically, though, even with careful selection of highly talented cohorts of students, this path is followed at most by 20-25% of those who attain their PhDs

## B. THE PERSPECTIVE FROM THE STUDENTS' WORLDVIEW

Just as faculty members cannot all become "mentors", it is important to understand that mentoring relationships are also based on the capacities and needs of students. I think the first basic requirement is that a student trusts a potential mentor. Just as faculty members need to be more open in the relationship, students must also become more open. But students face an additional hurdle: the faculty/mentor is also in a position of authority and power. To share some of their anxieties, limitations, and ambivalence, students must trust that the mentor will treat this part of their interaction with confidence (much as

confidentiality is upheld in our field research). Otherwise, “mentoring” will typically devolve into “advising”, as noted above. Furthermore, in a position of relative powerlessness, a student will even edit their communications further. They seek to avoid appearing vulnerable in their adviser’s eyes, and possibly in the department’s, when the adviser evaluates the students’ achievements, in committee or in faculty meetings. One of my student’s comments on this was:

Advising is laying out the beaten path and setting someone to grade it. Mentoring is finding the person in the bushes and showing them the range of paths out.

This student also noted that a number of students are actually more comfortable with advising than with mentoring. S/he also pointed out that in weighing these options, choosing a mentor entails some anticipation that such a supportive relationship will not be sustained after graduation, so that students’ anticipate some losses as well as gains from entering this relation with a mentor.

Trust in a potential mentor is actually a rare commodity in the academy, though, because of the competitive dimensions of both graduate school and employment markets after graduate school. For a student struggling to maintain a front-stage appearance of excellence, a backstage revelation of their vulnerability to a potential mentor can be quite threatening, both to their ego and to their high social standing in the department.

Our conceptualization of “student” as a master status while people are in graduate school obscures much of this reality. Those who enroll in our graduate programs come with traits that might be quite uncorrelated with their training advancement. At the extreme, some of these traits may actually preclude their completing their doctoral work. I noted after my own graduation from the University of Michigan that the attrition of my cohort was bimodal: some of the brightest, as well as the dullest students dropped out. This

may still be the case in many departments. The brightest drop out in part because they become alienated from the tasks and roles of graduate school. The dullest also drop out more, because they are labeled as inadequate or failing.

Beyond this extreme outcome of background traits, though, mentoring involves some acceptance of such traits by the student, who then chooses whether to share them with a possible mentor. It appears axiomatic to me that the traits that are revealed or expanded in discussions with a mentor are those that inhibit or constrain the student's graduate career. Mentors are usually sought because students are struggling with some issues that get in the way of a successful graduate career. Hence the need for trust is doubly important for students (and mentors). They must reveal some personal limitations of the student-mentee, and the mentor may be unwilling and/or unable to offer some supportive advice. No student really seeks a mentor who will merely say, "that's tough..." At the very least, students seek a mentor who can go beyond this and offer constructive suggestions: e.g., pick another topic, take a leave of absence, get more supportive people on your committee, or find some peers who share the problem. Students thus seek both an emotional and an instrumental support from mentors.

Yet mentors are constrained by their own bundle of traits, apart from the role of "faculty". To some extent, this leads to a self-selection of students who seek out a particular mentor. In addition, the potential mentor may respond that they cannot do much to help the student. So there is a dual selection process matching students and mentors. Over my years of mentoring, I have dealt with students whose limiting traits include: racial identity, family history, social class background, gender identity, and physical and emotional handicaps. Each of these requires a different kind of attentiveness and reflection by a mentor ñ there is no mentoring "rule" that applies to all "students".

I have not, however, been equally effective in offering students support and guidance across these categories of concern. But at minimum, I have validated students' concerns about how their multiple identities may influence their careers. In doing so, of course, students then perceive me as a more accessible and appropriate mentor, and they come in with trust built around my prior reputation. Paradoxically, because of the demands for openness and trust inherent in my mentoring relationships, other students have avoided any interaction with me. In general, my perception is that students in need who most avoid me tend to do so because of their reticence to be emotionally open. I have sometimes mused that the only socially-validated emotion in graduate school and in the discipline is anger. While I have mentored angry students, I usually have to reach out to find out why they are so angry, and to suggest strategies other than being aggressive that may serve them better in their graduate and professional careers.

Thus, just as "students" come "in all sizes", so do mentoring interactions. I list below a handful of more common patterns, which evolve from the broader sets of attributes of students.

## **II. STUDENTS' ROLE CONFLICTS IN SOCIOLOGY GRADUATE SCHOOL**

### **A. RISK-TAKING VS. RISK-AVERSION**

As someone who has sat on perhaps 125 doctoral dissertations, I gradually began to sense some of the emotional plate tectonics of student approaches to their dissertations. I found, after many years of mentoring and advising students, that they had two quite distinct models of "doing" sociological research. The first was the student who could most readily write the first (n-1) chapters of the thesis, but became totally immobilized by trying to write the concluding chapter. In contrast, the second type was frustrated in

having to write the first (n-1) chapters, and really spent their energy and enthusiasm in writing the concluding chapter. I had advised both types, but found my role somewhat different for these two ideal-typical students and their approach to their own research. Interestingly, in both models, the introductory chapter is written after the completion of much of the rest of the dissertation. This is due, I suspect, to their fear of failing to have “positive” outcomes of their thesis research [i.e., the objective is redefined to fit the analyses, the academic version of passing the hoop over the dog when it refuses to jump through it].

After puzzling over this for some time, I began to sense an underlying social psychological dimension that predicted the two responses to the dissertation challenge. Students who tended to be risk-averse were the ones who cringed at writing the concluding chapter; students who were more risk-takers tended to chafe at writing the preparatory chapters, but looked forward to taking a great epistemic and professional leap in claiming the “so what” of their work.

As with all participants in formal organizations, graduate students are subject to both selection process prior to entry, and socialization processes after they join the organization. Selection is a highly variable mixture of self-selection, and recruitment processes. And obviously, both sets of factors influence graduate students’ careers. Students enter graduate school with a variety of motivations and personality attributes. Risk-taking and risk-aversion tendencies are part of the personality factors students bring into graduate school. There is no simple correlation between family or social background and risk-taking, unfortunately. Personality propensities to take risk are a combination of individual chemistry, family experiences, and responses to their social class position.

In my early professional years, I frequently served on the Graduate Recruitment

Committee (this was a period in which there were 200-250 applicants, and entering cohorts were approximately 25). I realized soon after I took my position that my graduate program was far less structured than had been my own Michigan experience. There were relatively few required graduate courses beyond the first year, and the program seemed quite unstructured. I intuited that students who could cope with this somewhat-anomic situation would do better. For me, those qualities were part of my underlying script for making recruitment decisions.

Rather than emphasizing GRE scores or grade-point averages, I sought evidence in the papers students submitted, and in reference letters, to indicate that the student “marched to a different drummer”. I realized much later that part of what I was selecting for was students’ potential for risk-taking in their graduate careers. Students who were coming to my department seeking a predictable, orderly graduate program were likely to become alienated from this one. For some period, we prided ourselves on our liberal and unstructured program, under the influence of Howard Becker: see Beck and Becker(1969).

Our emphasis was on freedom for students to pick their own research focus, advisers, and thesis committees. I should note that at this point, there were few faculty with substantial research grants to support students. So in some ways the faculty passed on our own departmental risks in student selection to our Graduate School funding, which expanded with federal training grants (in social change, and in family studies). In some ways, this was a period in which mentoring was more feasible, since tenure pressures on faculty were much lower than in the last two decades. And there was more faculty interaction with students, but I am not sure that there was much focused mentoring on students.

During this period, though, faculty were not focused on sending our alumni to top-rated research institutions, again permitting a more casual interaction between faculty and

students. Graduate students became our alums, but not our proteges. The small number of faculty with external funding did often produce proteges, since these students worked under the direction of the faculty member on grant-based research. This did permit some risk-averse students to find a structured training locus [indeed, one of these alums went on to become a college president, and others found careers in bureaucratic research settings].

So there is a social structural dimension to risk-taking in graduate school, along with personality dimension (Colley 2002,2003). Different graduate schools stress risk-taking or risk-aversion,, and various faculty members themselves have careers built around choices of risk-taking or risk-aversion. Kuhn's (1968) distinction between scientists working within existing paradigms and breaking with these paradigms was the precursor of the later constructionist model of the sociology of science. But it remains one of the most dramatic differentiations. Sociology ostensibly rewards young scholars for innovative findings. Yet it also restrains them by limiting their material resources, including their prestige in the field.

This is a dialectical challenge for graduate students and young faculty. In order to create sufficient publications for obtaining tenure, there exists one synthesis of "quick and dirty" research: get it done, and get it "out there" on your c.v. But few of these publications are likely to have powerful influence on the field; thus, young scholars are trading off quality for quantity in their emergent status seeking. One of the ways in which they attempt to mask the weak quality of their work is generally to lay greater inferential claims than the work can substantiate. In 35 years of teaching, researching, and reviewing, I have to confess that I have never read an article or book that under-reports the work's sociological impacts.

From this dual perspective, it is clear how “learning the business” is quite a formidable task, and a considerable challenge for mentors. Do we encourage grad students to take more risks in their research, to produce a finely crafted and powerful analysis? Or do we encourage them to do the minimum of what needs to be done to get out of grad school and eventually get tenure? And how do we take account of their own personalities and work styles? We probably fail our risk-averse mentees by encouraging them to do a truly innovative theoretical and empirical thesis. Likewise, we also fail our risk-taking grad students by encouraging them to constrain their scope of research in order to get their dissertations completed.

My most striking memory is of a student who came to me with a 20 page outline of issues he wished to do in his thesis. I read it, and informed him that it would take a lifetime to accomplish this. We compromised on starting with one-half page of this, and then, if there were time/energy left over, he could go on to do more. In fact, he did a fine job on the half-page, completed his thesis, and went on to his first job to begin working on the remaining 20.5 pages of the proposal! That was my synthesis to his dialectical conflict, built on both his own personality and the contradictions of the academic stratification system.

On a broader level, in my department we encourage to have publications before they graduate. And they are strongly urged to have an ASR or AJS article -- which the department considers the most prestigious form of publication. Yet I point out to grad students that most faculty, after publishing in these prestigious journals early in their career, then go on to publish in less-risk-prone arenas, including both book chapters and journals where they are invited to submit by the editors. In effect, the faculty advisers are saying, “do what we say, not what we do”.

Ironically, I suspect that the senior faculty who continue to publish in the way they are attempting to socialize students are very likely those who can advise, but cannot mentor. They are acting with generativity, but in repeatedly promoting their own career advancement. “Their” students are often encouraged to emulate them, and even to collaborate with them. But the needs being met are often those of the advisor, not the advised.

### B. ANOMIE & ALIENATION IN GRADUATE WORK

Becker argued that “you can’t learn to become an x-ologist in a school of x-ology” [Becker et al 1961]. His analysis, and those of his students (e.g., Spurrell 1975) was based on the conflict between the needs of the school, and the needs of the student. Graduate students in sociology are confronted with a series of courses and of program requirements which are often not readily applicable to their future work roles. Moreover, these are fixed pedagogical and social control arrangements, which represent more of the needs of the faculty to monitor and shape students, and less on the needs of students. In many ways, risk-taking and risk-averse students should operate with different curricula, which would serve their proclivities. Of course, the same is true of professional employment: the traits that produce good teaching, first-rate research, and effective departmental administration are different.

Thus students with proclivities in one or more of these ought to be socialized differently in graduate school, and guided into specific work roles that best fit their abilities and personalities. But this is not typically the case in formal departmental programming, and even in formal student advising. This is another form of challenge to potential mentors and mentees. In many ways, graduate students are caught between states of anomie and alienation in their graduate programs. They are being trained to generate empirical

research articles. This creates an anomic condition for students. Even the best research methods and theory classes cannot help students become confident that they have actually chosen the best arguments, and the best methods, to generate their dissertations (and their research thereafter).

I recall a visit from a former student, some years beyond the dissertation, who came to visit me for methodological advice. As I ran through the alternatives I thought best, the student said “Yes, I know that.” At some point, I turned to the student and asked why s/he had come to see me, since s/he knew all the answers. The student paused, and then reflected that she had always been dealing with other people’s data before this, and this was the first time s/he actually had to make research design decisions. In some ways, his/her visit was a way s/he had to reduce the risks s/he confronted in creating his/her own research design. This illustrates the antithesis of graduate work, alienation. In order to succeed and develop faculty patronage, grad students often use a research fellowship to work with the materials chosen by their faculty sponsor. In like manner, they parrot the instructor in methods and theory courses, since they recognize the preferences and biases of their teachers. Accepting alienation is, then, one way of reducing anomie in graduate student roles. But neither anomie nor alienation actually deals with developing the full potential of an individual graduate student: it offers them various syntheses of alienation/anomie instead.

One anomaly in graduate student socialization, for example, is that grad students are shaped so as to enable them to generate empirical research articles. But they get little training in publishing theoretical syntheses, and virtually none in publishing books. Since major sociological reputations often devolve from innovative books, then, grad students are not being supported in organizing such risk-taking scholarship in their professional work. Such departmental norms don’t socialize the more risk-taking

students. Paradoxically, though, it may not even reduce the anomie for risk-averse students, since true empirical “research” is often closer to a model I call “search”. Research entails going back to existing literature, but there are few guidelines for students in selecting this literature, and sampling from it to carve out a scholarly niche that may pay off in research reputations. This may actually involve more anomic pressures on students in what they experience as search, in terms of a lack of specific faculty guidance in how to go about these procedures. [The pedagogical model I often use is how to use maps: when are we dealing with intercity frames, and when do we need intra-city street guides in our search activity?] One outcome of this is that risk-averse students accept some alienation in choosing to follow the research paths of the faculty they work with. While they may not have much attraction to these areas, but they know that the faculty members have achieved some professional reputations for their work. Students attached to faculty projects expect to gain some such reputations before and after they enter the academic labor force. In some ways, this is a graduate school example of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell 1983).

For mentors, then, the challenge is to help students steer between the dysfunctional experiences of anomie and alienation. Their strategies must be different for risk-taking and risk-averse students. For risk-takers, mentors must frame alternatives in ways to reduce student anomie. For risk-averse students, mentors must help students to select areas to work on other than “quick and dirty” projects, or merely imitative behavior modeled on their faculty advisers.

### C. SACRED VS. PROFANE VIEWS OF SOCIOLOGICAL WORK

One of the tensions that Shulman and Silver (2004) note is the absence of guidance on the “business” of sociology. In my own framing, I see this as a tension between the

sacred and secular/profane views of sociological work. In Moskos's terms (1978), this involves the conflict between sociological work as a "calling", versus such work as a "profession" or as a "job". In research universities, graduate courses tend to assume something like a calling ñ a sort of sacred mission of the research activity itself, absent the institutional realities that shape actual research production.

To some extent, advisers also accept the focus on the sacred quality, although they may shift towards the professional goals for students. To some extent, this is reinforced by the broad academic perspective that sociological research is developed "independently" of the researcher's institutional setting (cf. Keith & Moore, 1995).

Faculty advisers may offer some their advisees some perspectives on sociological employment as job-seeking activity. This typically happens as a student approaches completion of their thesis research. And usually, this occurs in conjunction with the adviser's concern about the burden of writing letters of recommendation and tapping professional contacts at other institutions in support of the job-seeking advisee. Yet even here, the bulk of this advice is on which schools to apply to, and what the student's chances are of getting a tenure-track position. At the extreme edge of advising behavior, faculty may share some knowledge or speculation about whether this student is likely to obtain tenure in this position.

#### D. THE TRANSITION FROM GRAD SCHOOL TO AN ACADEMIC MARKET

##### 1. Socializing Mentees into the Profession

It is interesting to note the difference between mentoring in a business setting and what I describe in this. The conceptualization in business institutions is of a mentor and a protege. I recently noted to one of my oldest university friends my discomfort in this

usage (I had initially replaced mentee in the draft of this paper with protege, but then returned to mentee). His response was that protege really was embedded in the organization's needs, while mentee was embedded in the needs of individual students.

Interestingly, when I circulated an early draft of this paper to former students of mine, they added a variety of dimensions to how I mentored them. In doing this, they became my tutors (as they often have become in my research and teaching). Included in their observations was a variety of professional supports I had offered them, which Shulman and Silver (2004) refer to as the "business" of sociology. This included encouraging their presentation of papers at professional meetings, and introducing them to some of my former mentees at these meetings. In one sense, their perception was that I was introducing them to nodes in my own network. Basically, these were people I trusted to be potential resources for my mentees as they completed their graduate work and transitioned into the academic labor market.

As I reflected on this dimension, I realized what a large proportion of this network consisted of former mentees and other students from my department. In one sense, this was a transition from a local to a more cosmopolitan network for my mentees. Yet this cosmopolitan web was made up of former "local" students of our graduate school. Axiomatically, of course, the fact that I have taught and mentored here for 36 years now means that my network has grown quite large. Many of these former mentees and other students were resources I urged my current mentees to contact during their dissertation work. Of course, the internet increases the efficacy of establishing these "intergenerational" contacts; but even 'snail mail' had earlier generated mostly positive linkages.

In the dissertation stage, these resources were extra tools for enhancing the thesis by

embedding it in the work and intellectual and professional consciousness of my former students. Beyond that, as my mentees matured, these contacts become at least “weak ties” (Granovetter 1974) to generating jobs and creating opportunities for journal articles and book chapters. Many of my former students had become editors of journals and books, as well as tenured faculty and department chairs. The majority of them were not in the top-ranked research universities, but in other universities and liberal arts colleges, as well as in applied positions outside the academy.

My network did not feature the superstars of the profession or discipline; rather, it featured competent scholars and teachers who were generally craftspeople, doing realistic rather than precision work (and mostly qualitative). Several years ago, a set of former mentees organized a “Schnaifest”. Some 65 former and current mentees attended. I requested that this not be a traditional Festschrift, though. Instead, we spent the day discussing “how to be human and a sociologist at the same time”. The intensity and extensity of the discussion exceeded my expectations, and ranged from combining activism with scholarship and integrating family relations into one’s life. One of the most telling moments came when a recent mentee stood up and complained: s/he had come thinking s/he was the only one I had ever mentored. Now s/he was disappointed when s/he discovered that my relationships with all the participants were similar.

Another expression of the nature of this network of former mentees was that most attendees said they had never experienced a discussion like this. Indeed, they wished they could carry on this dialogue in the future (which I was unable to facilitate, lacking emails for most of the network). The discussion was, for me, an indication of how much I had achieved in my mentoring of these people, and how they could carry on some of the perspectives I had offered them. But the greatest pleasure I received in the whole event was that a number of my mentees said that they tried to treat their students the way I had

treated them (for me, this was another expression of my generativity, and its reproduction in this network ñ a kind of inheritance I had passed on to future graduate students).

On the other hand, I was saddened when many indicated how relieved they were that I had not included current or former faculty in the event, because they had not experienced such mentoring relationships with my colleagues. The good news, though, was that these former mentees did feel free to speak their minds at the gathering, about their own graduate schooling and beyond.

## 2. Communicating Occupational Realities

The fact is that all sociological work occurs within the labor market. Mentoring largely occurs within a diffuse social structure. As students complete their graduate work, they move on to an academic position. This is in fact a job, within which a profession and even a calling may sometimes be pursued. I often urge my students to think what the difference would be between labeling someone a “sociological laborer” rather than a “sociologist”. Interestingly, among other gaps in their analysis, they rarely raise the issue of salary, as among other occupational realities.

Yet sociologists are as concerned about their salaries as most other “professional” workers, especially early in their careers. There is an unexplored dynamic that is especially powerful for new faculty. When grad students are within their graduate programs, their relative standing is not generally dependent on financial support. For most students, graduate school is a time of “genteel poverty”. The stratification system in grad programs is more about faculty evaluations of students than the monetary rewards for students. In material terms, graduate school is a time of deferred material gratification. This is partly offset by the quasi-communal social structure of the graduate student life, in which students share the burdens of low incomes, often seeing these as an

intrinsic part of their calling.

As students begin to enter the job market, the role of mentor changes, and often shrinks. We can't control the responses of the labor market to them, although we hope that our prior nurturing of them will help them succeed in this market. Nurturing, literally, refers to feeding. One of the pleasures of my later career was having enough money to treat my students to lunches (and an occasional dinner). It was only after I was tenured that I could share my (and their) favorite foods and restaurants, without depriving my family. These meals involved both the sharing of food and of ideas; students were treated as equals (other than financially). A former mentee also communicated the importance of place in mentoring. Over the years, I have made my office less "professional" and more "informal", essentially offering students a safe and comfortable place to share their ideas, hopes, and dreams. These and other approaches help reduce the hierarchical organizational gaps between mentors and mentees.

In writing this, a stark image returned to me. I was having dinner during an ASA meeting with several of my mentees and collaborators. When we left the restaurant, we stopped in the park nearby to continue our discussions. One of my mentees pointed across the street. A distinguished sociologist was leading a string of students, walking in a line behind him. This primordial representation of dominance and subservience was noted by my students, and they contrasted this sharply with the nature of our own evening together. The other students seemed to occupy a role as proteges, rather than mentees.

When mentees go "on the market", my mentoring devolves into counseling my students about strategies of interviewing (e.g., "treat every question at your job talk as an expression by a faculty member that they are as good or better than you, and respond positively and enthusiastically to each such question"). It has also involves sharing what

I know about other departments, even discouraging mentees from applying to some. This is based on my growing observations that most mentees who became square individual pegs in round institutional holes either don't get tenure, or left before their tenure reviews.

Although we don't openly admit this, part of our professional research activity is thus designed to enhance our present or future salaries. I do discuss some implications of this with mentees. As one of my senior colleagues once put it to me, sociologists pursue the "reverse Midas touch": that is, everything that turns to "gold" we touch. For increasingly more of us, this leads us into seeking research grants. In order to receive such grants, in addition to the intellectual merit of the proposals is the requirement that anonymous reviewers will see our research as potentially "golden", and see us as competent to complete the research and to publish it

Yet some portion of our efforts at framing and reframing our research profiles is nonetheless motivated by our internalized curiosity and/or social commitment to carry out some preferred line of inquiry. This is sometimes in tension with our desires to have our departments see us as highly "productive", even to label us as rising "stars". More prosaically, though, some of these efforts are routine ways to induce our employers to reward us monetarily for a high level of "productivity", to keep us in their employ and off a broader labor market search. Both books (which are marketable commodities) and published research papers (which are generally non-commodities) contribute to our departmental prestige, and enable us to push for higher salaries. Salary increases have immediate practical utility to us, and serve as a marker for our rising social status in the field (a version of our own "Protestant ethic", perhaps).

Given these largely predictable outcomes of successful completion of graduate school, do

most advisers socialize their advisees about these new pressures? Not generally. In part, there is little an adviser can do to cushion their advisee from their future economic and social buffeting. Even as a mentor, I often just casually note these matters as students complete their theses. The only general advice I give my mentees is that they should try to avoid teaching summer school. This permits them to keep their summers for research and writing. This is perhaps the greatest difference between having a mentee and cultivating a protege in the corporate world. Mentees eventually leave our graduate programs. Once they do leave, their futures are shaped by other organizations, and they only consult with us occasionally, while making their career decisions. At those points, we can continue to mentor them about strategizing their approach to the discipline and profession.

### **III. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

Mentoring is probably quite rare in graduate schools, since it places heavy emotional demands on both the mentor and mentee. Yet the ideal type of mentoring affords considerable benefits for graduate students while they “learn their craft”. And it can afford substantial emotional satisfaction for mentoring faculty. While faculty may be able to advise students with some competency, such advising works best when students’ expectations coincide with the department’s own aspirations for their alums (Keith & Moore, 1995). In my own department, placement into a ranked research university is the ideal-typical outcome of our graduate education (and our Graduate School also tries to reinforce this standard).

Yet despite our careful selection and early socializing of students, only students enter with this as their sole end. And as they learn more about the means they must use to achieve this role, a number of the previously-committed students begin to have doubts.

Advising is sufficient for the remaining students. As sociologists, we know that the fit between individuals and the roles they occupy is much less than perfect. This is, after all, one of the roots of informal structures that deviate from formal organizational structures. Informal work parameters take into account both the needs and capacities of workers, and the organizational goals and means (Moore & Keith 1992; Keith & Moore 1995).

For the plurality of students, finding and working with a mentor has substantial payoffs. The interaction supports an informal 'shop-floor culture' (Burawoy 1982), in students' graduate careers. This permits students some space in a formal program to consider their own strengths and limitations as students. More importantly, though, it serves to help socialize students into thinking about their own capacities and preferences for future work roles. In effect, instead of fitting the 'square pegs' from the graduate student ranks into the round holes of research universities, it enables students to have more of their own voice in shaping their future careers.

For some, a mentor will carefully nurture and encourage highly professionally competent but anxious students how to "square up" their roundness. For others, a mentor will help students legitimize their preferences for finding "round holes" in the labor market. A mentor will offer mentees more agency in their own careers. The resulting directions that students take will be more an outcome of the interaction between the people who occupy the graduate student role (for 5-10 years) and the practices and opportunities for these people.

Mentors can help bridge the gap between the formal requirements and expectations of graduate programs, and the perceived (and real) capacities, limitations, and preferences of these people. They offer uneasy graduate students (i.e., most students) to accumulate more emotional and social capital to enable them to shape their own careers. The support

and even nurturance of mentees is, in this way, actually an important way to match the supply of students to the diffused demands of the professional (or activist) marketplace.

Yet advising is perhaps all that many students will seek, because they fear acknowledging how they are actually somewhat alienated from a department's construction of its ideal-type "student. Mentors help students negotiate between their own capacities and the department's formal work structure, then.

For faculty who have the capacity to mentor, their reward is a more lasting and deeper relationship with their mentees (cf. Colley 2002, 2003). Seeing your mentee get placed in a position that best fits him/her is a great satisfaction. And showing the human face of your professional world-view actually allows mentors to relieve some of their own frustrations. In this interactive model, mentors and mentees become informal audiences and forums for mentors to be true to themselves, and their profession.

Beyond this, though, I should admit that the institutional rewards in graduate programs are not offered for mentoring. Indeed, the advising structure favored by departments can serve to increase the anomie and/or alienation of graduate students. The truth is that advising is more co-action than interaction, and interaction is what really helps the student to understand what the nature of sociological work means for them, as individuals.

When does mentoring end? One of my former mentees suggested it ends when mentees get tenure. Certainly, the relationship changes then. Mentees become friends (or not), or friendships deepen and mature (or not). From a developmental standpoint, healthy mentoring leads mentors to create mentees who have the capacity to mentor their own students, and even to tutor (or sometimes even mentor) their former mentors. The

feedback my mentees have offered me in their reading of drafts of this paper reminds me of the cyclical and reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships.

## REFERENCES

Becker, Howard S. & B. Beck. (1969). "Modest Proposals for Graduate Education in Sociology." *The American Sociologist* 4(3).

Becker, Howard S., Blanche Geer, Everett C. Hughes & Anselm L. Strauss. 1961. *Boys In White: Student Culture In Medical School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

Burawoy, Michael. 1982. *Manufacturing Consent : Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Colley, Helen. 2002. "A 'rough guide' to the history of mentoring from a Marxist feminist perspective." *Journal for Education in Teaching*, 28 (3): 257-273.

-----2003. *Mentoring for Social Inclusion: A Critical Approach to Nurturing Mentor Relationships*. London & New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

DiMaggio, Paul & Walter Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism And Collective Rationality In Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48: 147 - 160.

Erikson, Eric H. 1974. *Dimensions of a New Identity*. New York: Norton.

Granovetter, Mark. 1974. *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Keith, Bruce, J. S. Layne, N. Babchuk, & K. Johnson. 2002. "The context of scientific achievement: Sex status, organizational environments, and the timing of publication on scholarship outcomes." *Social Forces* 80 (4): 1253-1282

Keith, Bruce & Helen A. Moore. 1995. "Training Sociologists: An assessment of professional socialization and the emergence of career aspirations." *Teaching Sociology*, 23 (July): 192-214

Kuhn, Thomas S. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moore, Helen A. & Bruce Keith. 1992. "Human capital, social integration, and tournaments: A test of graduate success models". *The American Sociologist*, Summer: 52-71.

Moskos, Charles. 1978. "The Emergent Military: Calling, Profession, or Occupation." Pp. 199-206 in Franklin Margiotta, editor, *The Changing World of the American Military*. Boulder: Westview Press..

Schnaiberg, Allan. 1977. "Obstacles to Environmental Research by Scientists and Technologists: A Social Structural Analysis." *Social Problems* June:500-520.

Shulman, David & Ira Silver. 2004. "The Business of Becoming a Professional Sociologist: Unpacking the Informal Training of Graduate School". *The American*

*Sociologist.*

Spurrell, Margaret J. 1975. *The Formation of a Student Aesthetic Within a University Theatre Department*. Sociology dissertation. Northwestern University.

Stevens , Mitchell L . (2003) “College Applicants as Bundled Inputs”. Paper presented at annual meetings of the American Sociological Association.

TSQ. 2001. “Mentoring”. *The Graduate School Quarterly*. Northwestern University. Evanston, IL.

Wilson, Everett K, 1971. *Sociology: Rules, Roles, and Relationships*. Revised edition. Dorsey Press, Homewood, IL.

### Endnotes

1. Even though I have been tenured for three decades, I can painfully recall the demands confronting a new faculty member, adapting to a sort of “internal labor market” within their school and department. Moreover, this is coupled with the deferred material gratification associated with their graduate school years. This helps to explain why the upward mobility anticipated by grad students in moving from graduate school to a regular sociological position often feels like a net form of downward mobility. At the time of their graduation, students move from this collective economy into a role within the market economy itself.

2. In many ways, then, our attention as young faculty members is often

disproportionately geared to enhancing our salaries immediately, as well as enhancing our reputations so as to enhance our salaries in the near future. Along with many other young faculty, I remember feeling a sense of impoverishment when I entered my first job, rather than a sense of material advancement. As with many of my peers, I had started a family, and realized how limited my “expansive” new salary was (compared with a graduate school stipend). This sense of relatively downward economic mobility was built around the fact that s/he is now part of a highly stratified economic organization, and is typically placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. This in turn directs our former grad students to continuously struggle for greater income.

3. Thus, we are often in the position of shaping our research so as to encourage reviewers to label us as “reasonable”, our research as “feasible”, and our future as “productive” (Schnaiberg 1977). When I published my first book in 1980, a very prestigious colleague in another department patiently explained to me that it was not the royalties from the book that would economically benefit me. Rather, it was an increase in my university salary, both immediately and in the future, that would flow from this publication.