54

Mentorship, sponsorship and the hidden curriculum of research funding

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Despite extensive literature on mentoring in academe, addressing dyadic mentoring and formal mentorship programs, and some extensions and critical accounts, there is little analysis of mentorship or sponsorship related to research funding trajectories. The 27 academics interviewed in our project about the social production of social science research frequently inserted their experiences of mentoring and being mentored into our discussions of their research careers. We ask: *How do the participants talk about mentoring related to their research funding trajectories?*

Participants, drawn from 7 universities in Ontario, Canada, mostly women and often racialized or Indigeneous scholars, had strong funding records around social justice themes. We consider mentoring in formal programs, in informal dyads, in collaborations, from research administrators, from the community; mentorship versus sponsorship; mentoring others; and issues with mentoring. In presenting examples of each category, we raise the broader question of how newcomers access the hidden curriculum of research funding.

Full paper

Does the world need another paper about mentoring? We believe we have something original to offer, given that few accounts connect mentoring with research funding, as we do. Our project, ‘Academic Researchers in Challenging Times’ (2017–2024), focuses on the social production of social science research. The theoretical framework conceptualizes research careers with respect to sensemaking (Degn, 2018), researcher identity development (Castelló et al., 2021) and contextual impacts (Leišyté et al., 2021).

Mentoring was an *emergent topic* in our study, that is, one that came from ‘the data themselves’ rather than the literature or questions asked (Tesch, 1990, p. 141). The academics we interviewed frequently inserted their experiences of mentoring and being mentored into our discussions of their research careers. For this paper, we ask: *How do the participants talk about mentoring related to their research funding trajectories?*

Literature

Much of the literature describes formal mentoring programs (Carter-Sowell et al., 2019), usually directed at a target group, such as early career, women, or racialized scholars (e.g. Boeren et al., 2015; Bhopal, 2020; Meschitti et al., 2017), or traditional dyadic mentoring, in which a senior scholar provides advice to a new scholar (Ayyala et al., 2019). Also explored are alternative forms of mentoring, including group, peer, reciprocal, feminist and self-mentoring (e.g. Caretta & Faria, 2020; Moss et al., 1999; Poitras Pratt et al., 2021). Particularly interesting are accounts of the ways mentoring might challenge the status quo rather than encourage conformity (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Goerisch et al., 2019). Mentorship has been distinguished from sponsorship, wherein an influential person provides advocacy, protection, and gifts of opportunity, which O’Connor et al. (2020) regard as ‘men’s invisible advantage in STEM’ (p. 765). Research funding is seldom considered in mentorship or sponsorship literature (exceptions include Feldman et al., 2010; Weber-Main et al., 2021).

Method

We conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 27 academics in sociology, geography, education and social work,

drawn from seven universities in Ontario, Canada. Most participants (24) identified as women, and many (11) as Indigenous or racialized scholars. Interviewees had social justice themes in their research and strong funding records. We asked about their academic and research histories, experiences of project leadership and collaboration, funding successes, supports and hindrances.

For this interpretive analysis, each author began with open and provisional coding of transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). We searched for implicit and explicit references to mentorship or sponsorship and associated concepts. Subsequent cycles of coding focused upon thematic connections within and across transcripts (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). We identified the following subthemes: mentoring in formal programs, in informal dyads, in research collaborations, from research administrators, from the community; mentorship versus sponsorship; mentoring others; and issues with mentoring.

Findings

In the full paper, we present examples of each category plus discussion. The following quotations illustrate several subthemes.

Informal dyadic mentoring

I really like working with my mentor [senior male academic] because he has so much knowledge. He's 30 years older than me. He knows 30 years more stuff than I do. (Jacqueline)

Mentoring through research collaborations

Having [a senior academic] pick me up, even though I had no record, was a big plus. I think if a senior faculty would . . . bring [new academics] into [their] research projects, that's an excellent experience. . . . He mentored me without formally being a mentor. (Tina)

Mentoring or sponsoring?

My supervisor was invited to give a keynote. . . and couldn't go and so asked me if I wanted to go in her place and I said okay. . . . I met the program officer [and emailed her]…. she wrote back and said, this is so great. If you can get me a proposal, I will give you

$250,000. (Denise)

Mentoring others

Part of my mentorship philosophy is to do everything I can to mentor and advance the careers of equity-seeking groups. . . . My graduate students are either LGBTQ, Indigenous, Muslim or people of colour or some mix of those. (Emily)

Conclusion

For some, especially women and racialized scholars, commitments like Emily's led to work overload through an 'identity tax' (cf. Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). Moreover, inequities in institutional provision were typical. Mentoring experiences were sporadic and accidental, rarely formalized. Nevertheless, most participants believed that structured programs would be of benefit, reflecting the uncertainty many newer (and some experienced) academics have about how to secure research funding and manage teams, knowledge that appears to reside in the hidden curriculum of higher education (Elliot et al., 2016; Margolis, 2001).

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